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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

12. SINK INTO MY DREAM, PARADISE! (ACT 2)





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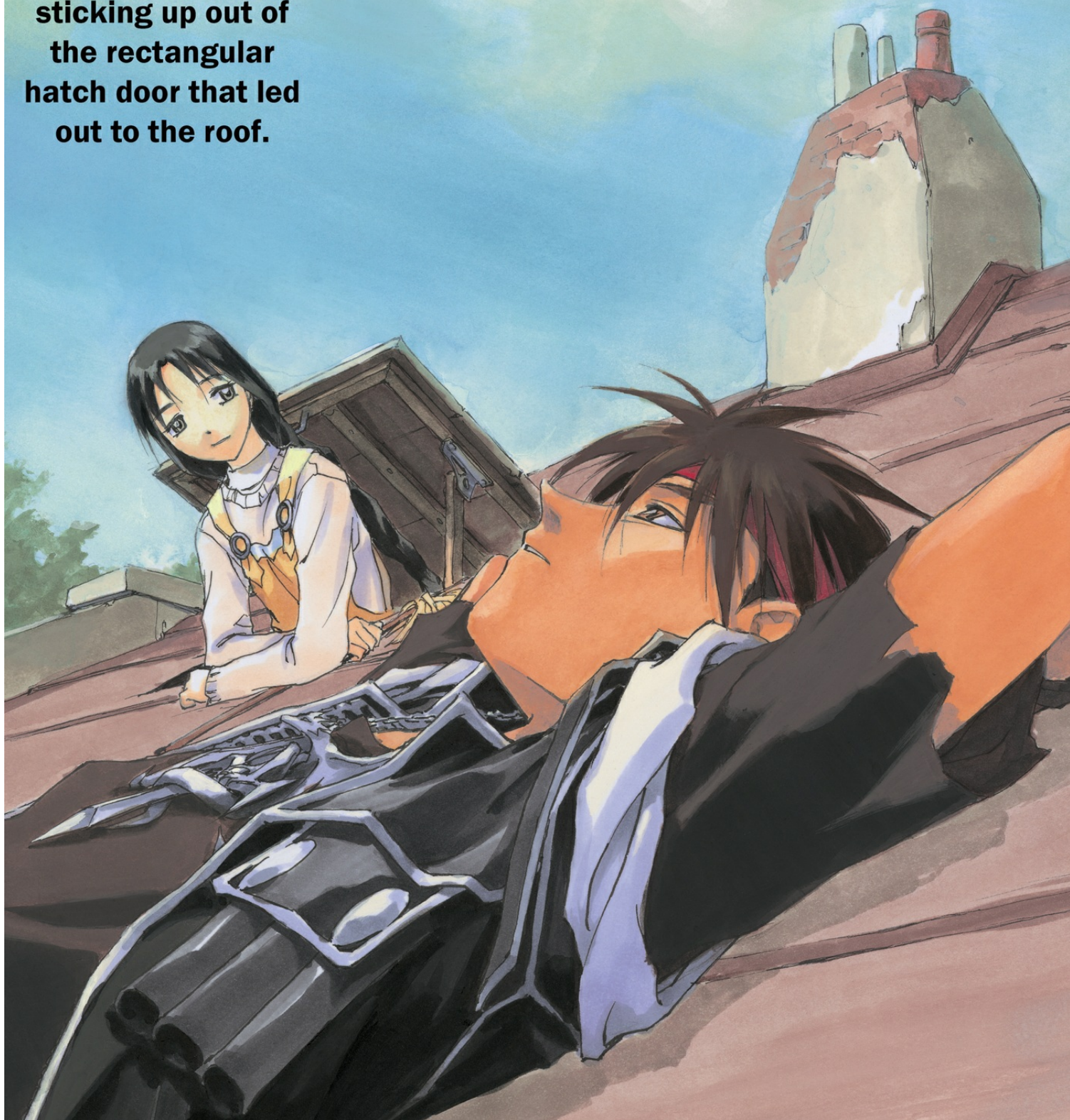
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12. SINK INTO MY DREAM, PARADISE! (ACT 2)



***“Never thought I'd
see a look like that
on your face.”***

**Orphen looked up
when he heard the
voice. He saw Eris
looking at him,
sticking up out of
the rectangular
hatch door that led
out to the roof.**





*"I release thee,
Sword of Light!"*
A beam of heat
and light formed
in the air and
converged on the
monkey-like
beast.

**Orphen was
lying upside
down with
Claiomh sitting
right on top of
him. He sort of
wanted to cry.**



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Chapter VII: A Job Request with No Pay

“...Just a dream?” Volkan muttered as he opened his eyes.

Though he was fairly certain he’d been dreaming, he couldn’t remember exactly what sort of dream it was, just that it was a terrible nightmare. Of that, at least, he was certain. He still felt a sharp pain, almost like cold water had been poured directly into his brain somewhere.

He blinked slowly. All his senses were sharp, but for some reason, his body could only move sluggishly. His vision was a little blurry, but after a few seconds, everything came into focus.

The ceiling was made of green stone, the surface of the stone covered in scratches. The scratches went in all directions and looked almost like writing. Of course, whether they *were* writing or were just simple scratches, he couldn’t read them.

His homeland came to mind for some reason. Masmaturia. The dwarf-controlled region.

After all this time, it wasn’t like he was suddenly homesick. Nothing else came to mind after remembering his home. He just emotionlessly recalled the place. It was just the place where he used to live.

Volkan took a deep breath. He still couldn’t move the way he wanted to. There was a lukewarm air all around him. A stagnant air. That was only natural. He was inside, after all.

Well then...

“What was it again...?” Volkan screwed his face up. He felt like he’d said something, but he couldn’t remember what it was he’d said. He rolled over onto his back and shook his head slowly, a bad taste in his mouth.

When he moved his head, he saw green walls, the same as the ceiling. Like the ceiling, it wasn’t a vibrant green, but a scuffed, murky, off-color green. A boring green, one that would surely place on the low end if you rounded up all

the greens in the world and ranked them. The ceiling, the walls, and the floor that he had just caught a glimpse of. They were all green.

His vision grew dark. He seemed to have half-closed his eyelids. They snapped open now. Not on purpose, but just as reflexive resistance to falling asleep.

Still, he was sleepy.

So he muttered to himself as he somehow managed to stay conscious. Being a warrior—a hero of the common people, especially—he felt like he couldn't just go back to sleep without figuring out what was going on.

If he gave himself a reason to, getting up wouldn't be that hard. He still felt fatigued, but he tried to pull himself upright, looking around at his surroundings and himself.

He hadn't been sleeping on the floor. Well, it didn't *look* like the floor, anyway—it seemed more like a bed. But to be more precise, it was really just a part of the floor that was raised up a bit from everything else, in the center of the room. It was about a meter higher than the rest of the floor. Considering his own height, Volkan judged this to be pretty high up.

In one wall, there was a rectangular hole that must have functioned as an entrance and exit. There was no door, but there was a long hallway outside, though Volkan had no idea where it went.

Near the ceiling, a light floated. It was a strange light, unlike the light of a gas lamp. An unnatural sphere, like light had just gathered up in one spot. This light was probably why the room had a whitish tint to it. Of course, if it wasn't here, the room would probably be pitch-black. There was no sort of window anywhere, after all.

"Well, this is no problem," Volkan said assertively, even though he might not be able to get outside from here.

He folded his arms and cocked his head. Something was bothering him.

He groaned atop the bed.

"...Why did I dream about dying?"



In the end, the fire hadn't presented much of a danger at all.

Surveying the entrance to the Branch of the Forest Lodge, which had been completely repaired by his sorcery, Orphen muttered to himself, "The problem is...if the same thing happens again."

It was very possible. Orphen once again regretted letting the arsonist get away. He scratched his head, clucking his tongue in frustration.

He was fairly certain he'd made the guy regret it last night, maybe even enough that he'd swear off doing something so stupid ever again. But since he'd let the guy get away, he couldn't deny the possibility of a second offense. It was certainly possible.

"Depends on motive, huh..." he muttered and looked around for no particular reason. It wasn't as if the arsonist was just going to be lurking somewhere nearby.

However...

"Master!"

Orphen searched for the voice that had called him. There was a blond boy sticking his head out of a window on the second story of the lodge, looking down at him.

"What is it, Majic?" Orphen asked curiously as he looked up at him. "Isn't that a guest room? What are you doing in there?"

"You're out of the loop again, Master?" Majic blinked like he wasn't expecting the question. "Eris said we could stay in a guest room for however long we liked, you know, since you put out the fire before it got too bad last night. So I just brought our stuff up here."

"Huh..." Orphen said vaguely. He had several thoughts, but didn't see any reason to tell them to Majic, so he decided not to bring them up. Instead, he asked, "Weren't we gonna leave here today, though?"

"We did say that, come to think of it..." Majic frowned. "But now that we've got a proper room we can stay in, I don't think there's any harm in staying a little longer."

“Hmm...”

“Come on, why not? It’s a pretty nice room, too. Though you’ll have to share it with me, since it’s a double. Claiomh was complaining that she’ll still be stuck staying in Eris’s room.”

“How greedy.”

“Yeah. Plus, we don’t have to help out around here anymore either. So please help me with my training today, Master.”

Orphen held his tongue for a moment before saying, “...Sure, if I can.”

“Master?” Majic had been in such a good mood, but his expression clouded now. A wrinkle that really didn’t suit him formed on his brow. It looked just as out of place on him as the black cloak he always wore. “What do you mean, ‘if you can’?! Why wouldn’t you be able to?! You’re always finding some excuse to slack off...why don’t you put yourself in my shoes? I’m keeping my promise not to use sorcery until I learn how to control it, aren’t I? So it’s not fair if you don’t teach me how to do that—”

“Cripes, I got it already.” Orphen waved his hand, cutting off Majic’s tirade. He sighed and explained himself. “It’s not that I want to slack off. It’s just...”

“Just what?” Majic still seemed skeptical.

Orphen smiled wryly. “Well... We don’t have to camp out anymore and we’re not being forced to work like servants... Guess we should be celebrating.”

He put a hand on his hip and looked up at the compact, white lodge—not at the window Majic was poking out of, but at the whole thing. After a longer pause than the one before, he told Majic, “But I get the distinct sense we’ll be getting a lot busier...”

It was a beautiful morning with fine weather, and his mood should have been bright, so why was he so worried?

...Guess this is just fate. Or my nature, Orphen thought with a wry smile. They were pretty much the same thing, anyway. Something that wouldn’t go away until he died, in other words.

If it would be with him forever, then what more could he do but smile wryly about it? That there was nothing else he could do about it was simply another thing for him to puzzle over.

Orphen gazed up at the sky, lying on the roof and enjoying the pleasant morning breeze. Up in this high-altitude town, the sky seemed even higher. Birds were flying in circles up in the clear, unpolluted sky. It was an ideal sky, full of innumerable colors that could never be contained in a painting, all coming together to form one pristine shade. It made him wonder what existed, up beyond that sky.

This same, grand sky existed above every other part of the continent. No matter where you looked up at it from on the paltry little land, you wouldn't see something much different. Some people said that this sky went on forever. The exact composition of the world hadn't been fully elucidated yet, but that was a theory Orphen sort of thought he could get behind.

The sky... huh? A most simple, most straightforward, most easily understood, most plain world of death. No one could live in the sky.

Still, no one died in the sky either. No one fell into the sky...

"Never thought I'd see a look like that on your face."

Orphen looked up when he heard the voice. He saw Eris looking at him, sticking up out of the rectangular hatch door that led out to the roof. The door was so plain, Orphen hadn't even noticed there was a way to get onto the roof from the inside of the building, but for some reason, he wasn't surprised. The sky tended to suck up about half of the emotions of whoever looked up at it.

"A look like what?" Orphen asked, looking back up at the sky.

He'd just taken a glance at her, but for a moment, it almost looked like her figure was floating up in the blue sky. She seemed to be smiling...though maybe that was just his delusion.

"A look like you want to go somewhere..." she said, her tone somehow despondent.

"Go somewhere?"

“There’s nobody here who looks like that. Nobody who lives here ever leaves.”

“It’s not like the tourists stay forever, right?”

“They get looks like they’re just going home. There’s nobody here who moves on to somewhere else afterward.”

That’s just semantics, Orphen thought, though he didn’t feel like giving it voice. He sat up and stole a glance at Eris over his shoulder, then groaned. “It’s not like I don’t have anywhere to go home to. There’s just something I have to go and do.”

Eris narrowed her eyes, though not in a smile. It was more like she was about to close her eyes, but stopped. Like she was sighing with her eyes. Her dainty shoulders moved in the same rhythm as a sigh. Orphen could tell even from a distance.

“I’m terrible at small talk.”

“...Yeah, maybe. Not that I’m much better.” Orphen turned around completely now to face her. “So, there’s something you want to ask me, isn’t there?”

“I was hoping you would do something for me.”

“Is it the...what did you say they were called? Lotz? That you were talking about last night?” Orphen asked.

Eris nodded. “Maybe this is just my imagination, but I don’t think it’s like them to be so ruthless...”

“It might not be your imagination.” Orphen looked up at nothing, shrugging his shoulders. “Arson is serious, though. People might have died. No matter how you slice it, I think this is a job for the police.”

“There aren’t any proper police here unless you go down to Nashwater at the base of the mountain. This town has a self-defense force, but it’s under the control of Lotz...” Her tone was matter-of-fact. Or maybe resigned.

Orphen glanced at her for just a moment. She was wearing the same apron she’d worn the day before. She’d probably been cleaning and caught a glance of

him—there was a duster in her hand. As usual, she didn't wear much of an expression, but the look in her eyes seemed rather cornered.

Looking her in those eyes, he sighed. "Tell me what's going on. I'll...probably be able to figure something out."

He wasn't expecting her to get big eyes full of sparkles when he said that or anything, but...the only actual change that occurred when she heard his answer was that she put down the duster in her hand. Maybe a tiny bit of the tension in her expression left her face, too...

"Lotz has always been around...he's always controlled the town, ever since a long time ago." Eris stopped there and pulled herself out onto the roof. The footing wasn't great there, so she pulled herself over the precarious wooden surface on all fours. Once she was next to Orphen, she pointed out at the center of the town.

In the direction she was pointing, there was one large building that stood out from the rest.

"That's the Lotz Group's...what should I call it? Home base? Headquarters? Something to that effect."

"Do they have a fake hot spring, too?"

For a moment, he thought she'd argue like when he said the same thing to her mother, but when he took a look at her he realized that probably wouldn't happen.

"Yes." Eris chuckled a bit. "They're no exception. That's the Lotz Hotel. Usually, when people say 'Lotz,' that big hotel is what they mean, but...well, they're basically like the leader of an association most of the hot spring inns around here are a part of. The Lotz Group. And they're expanding their membership with pretty pushy methods. They've hired people who seem like they're from some gang, too. One who's been pretty annoying lately is this guy named Ronan. He's a former dispatch officer or something, a real thug, and all the people who were holding out on joining are starting to fall in line out of fear of this guy..."

"And you guys...?" Orphen gazed down at the black walls of the Lotz Hotel as

he listened to her story, and asked a question to fill in the blank at the end of it. There was no more meaning in the question than that. He already knew the answer, after all.

“We’re scared, too. Isn’t that obvious?” Eris’s face was pale. She wrapped her arms around herself lightly and continued, “The rumors are that this Ronan guy was fired from the police for killing someone.”

“Hmm,” was Orphen’s response.

That seemed to take Eris by surprise. “Aren’t you scared?” she asked, a blank look on her face. “You might be up against a murderer.”

“I dunno. I try not to believe rumors. So, what was it you were hoping I would do, anyway?”

“Lotz has been insisting we join the group, too...but we have no intent to do so. They’ve been coming by the inn every day, but...now they’re resorting to arson.”

Orphen looked away, taking a short breath and shaking his head slightly. He watched the girl’s expression cloud—it looked like she was trying to express anger and failing, then asked, “So, you want me to get them to stop?” He thought it was kind of stupid even as he said it. Who wouldn’t want them to stop? But he couldn’t come up with another way to ask.

Still, Eris nodded honestly. “I want a guarantee that they’ll never do something like that again.” She sighed. “I don’t want to be nervous around the time that they always come anymore, or have to duck over to the other side of the street every time I run into them in town, or hear their persistent recruitment spiel ever again! Or have them set fire to the inn entrance in the middle of the night either, of course. I’m sick of it. I hate being worried about them coming when I’m at home or about seeing them when I go out. This town is so boring, but the only thing you can get here without any trouble is stress—” It was rare for her to say this much so fast, but she stopped there as if surprised.

She cleared her throat and then corrected herself. “Well...you’re one of those...people who use sorcery, aren’t you? That’s why I’m asking you. It’s not like I want to put you in danger or anything, though. I’m thankful just for you

putting out the fire last night, which is why I don't mind if you use a guest room for however long you want. And you don't need to say yes to this either."

"Well, I don't want you to feel like you owe me either." Orphen shrugged. "Plus...I was intending to stay here a little longer originally anyway."

"So you'll do it?"

"Yeah." Orphen looked down at the Lotz Hotel with a wry smile on his face. "If I don't face off against some actual human gangster types pretty soon, I think I'll become a real misanthrope."

Orphen felt Eris looking at him like she didn't understand, but he ignored her and moved his gaze from the hotel to the town at large, then the sky far off in the distance.

"...Hey, Orphen."

"Yeah?"

"I think this is pretty strange, you know."

"What is?"

"If you're going on a walk, you should go somewhere with a good view, or a gift shop, or something like that, right?"

"I guess so."

"So why are we here?"

"Well, that'd be because..." Orphen finally turned to her then. He didn't have to turn very far, of course, seeing as his conversation partner was walking beside him.

She was a small girl with blonde hair down to her waist. On her head was Leki, as usual. The unfamiliar light pink dress she wore must have been borrowed from Eris. The girl seemed to have a bad habit of borrowing clothes from people, though since it did no harm to Orphen, he'd ignored it up until now.

Turning to her, Orphen told her, "When you go on a walk with a kid, you take 'em to the park, right?"

“...Is this a park...?” Claiomh asked dubiously.

I was wondering the same thing, Orphen thought to himself. He hadn't meant much by the comment, though. It was just what came to mind. There wasn't even any meaning in bringing her along with him. He'd just seen her when he was leaving the inn, so he asked her along for no particular reason.

They were standing at the entrance to the hot spring town—that big plaza where the carriages had sped in and the inns had attempted to pull in customers. It was still quiet for now, and they couldn't see anyone around. It was just like when they'd arrived at the town the day before.

When the time came, carriages from Nashwater would arrive here and people from the inns would charge over to invite the new visitors to their properties. Orphen looked up at the sky, guessing the time. It would probably be half an hour or so until that time came. That was just a rough estimate, of course.

“What brought this on though, Orphen?” she asked with a sunny smile. She must not have actually been in a bad mood at all. Leki was curled up comfortably on her head as well.

“What?” Orphen asked.

“You know what I mean,” she said, her shoulders drooping. “You were making so much noise about leaving yesterday.”

“...Well, to put it simply, I changed my mind...” Orphen was cagey at first, but then corrected himself. “You were there for the arson scare last night. It wouldn't sit right with me to just leave after that.”

He thought he was just saying something obvious, but Claiomh didn't seem to agree. She blinked like the answer was unexpected and furrowed her brow. “...You mean you didn't do that, Orphen?”

“Why would you think I did?!” The absurd question was asked so casually, he couldn't help shouting in response.

Still, her tone remained the same. “Well, the entrance was all singed and you were standing right there...” she muttered, folding her arms pensively. “The only thing missing is a motive. Very suspicious...”

“I’m beginning to see what you think of me.” Orphen groaned, eyes half-lidded. He took a look at Leki, who was gnawing on his feet to loosen them up on top of Claiomh’s head, and then looked back at her. “Yeesh. I get it already. I’m just an agent of destruction and chaos that doesn’t spare any thought to consequences, right? But I’ll have you know, your count on the ‘destroying things for no reason’ record is a lot higher than mine this season.”

“Ugh...!” Claiomh looked away, breaking out into a cold sweat. Orphen’s comment must have hit home.

Orphen watched her with narrowed eyes as he pulled a notebook out of his pocket and flipped through it. He put a hand to his forehead, feeling dizzy.

“See, as far as I can remember, I’ve only broken things in nineteen incidents recently, yet you’ve got a frightful record of twenty.”

“...There’s hardly any difference.”

“Are you crazy?! Your number in the tens place is two! Mine is one! You could say that’s a difference of ten whole incidents!”

“You could not say that!” Claiomh shouted, waving her arms. She found an opportunity to snatch the notebook out of Orphen’s hand and shouted, “Aaah! I knew it! I thought something was weird! That’s no fair, Orphen! You’ve got the pot and the pot lid listed as separate incidents for just me! This is the way adults do things, and it’s mean, and I don’t agree with it, and how could you do something like this, and what did I do wrong anyway, huh?!”

“What! Are you saying the pot and the pot lid should be counted as one thing, then?! They’re completely different objects, which is why they have different names! You call a pot lid a pot lid because it’s not a pot and you call a pot a pot because it’s not a pot lid! Can you simmer vegetables in a pot lid and cover it with a pot?! You can’t!”

“You’re changing the subject! I’m trying to say you’re being sneaky, and the difference between a pot and a pot lid doesn’t matter!”

“Of course it matters! And you’re the one who brought this up in the first place! Listen up, I bet the craftsmen who make pots and the ones who make pot lids have to work tirelessly to protect their own territory—”

“——!”

“——!”

...



They yelled at each other for quite some time, took some more time to catch their breath, and then...

Orphen groaned, shoulders heaving. "Let's stop... This is unproductive."

"...I guess so..."

After coming to an agreement for the time being, Orphen looked up at the sky again.

"In any case..." Claiomh glanced at Orphen's face and stretched, completely recovered.

"What?" Orphen asked, glancing down at her with just his eyes.

"I didn't really get it. What was that arson thing last night anyway?"

"Well..." Orphen searched for the right words to say. He wasn't quite sure if he managed to find them, but he opened his mouth slowly and said, "Basically, it was a really stupid crime..."

"What was?" Claiomh asked right away.

Orphen turned to face her again and shrugged. "According to Eris, it's gotta be the work of this Lotz group who basically control the hot spring town. They're like a gang, and they've been trying to get Eris's inn to join in, really pestering them about it. But Eris and her mom don't plan on joining, so they're not getting anywhere. If they got fed up and set the inn on fire because of that..." He sighed. "It's a stupid crime, right? There's no meaning in it."

"But if the fire scares them, maybe they'll join that gang thing, then."

"What if the inn had burned down and killed the owners and the guests? Police from the town at the base of the mountain would have to come running then, and if you got charged with mass murder, your whole life would basically be over. I can't imagine it was worth that risk."

Orphen patted Claiomh on the head as he spoke. "I'm guessing it was some grunt with a stupid idea who did that all on his own. That's probably all you could expect from a gang out in the boonies like this."

"Really?"

“How should I know? It’s not like this is my area of expertise—”

That’s when the bell they’d heard yesterday started to ring out, loud. It echoed far into the distant sky, bouncing off the mountain and spreading out further into the town.

They could see a cloud of dust off in the distance, on the path to the foot of the mountain outside the town. The same exact scene from the day before was playing out again—and likely had been for a long time now.

Carriages sped into the town one after another. At the same time, workers from the hot spring inns all around came out in droves, all carrying banners. The carriages spat out tourists, who were swarmed by the inn barkers.

Standing slightly apart from all this, Orphen had his gaze fixed on one thing.

The commotion ended surprisingly quickly. The tourists and barkers all drew away to the inns. All that was left behind was the wind and the dust. And...Orphen smirked and raised his voice. He wasn’t addressing Claiomh, but projecting it much farther.

“It only makes sense for the police to know a lot about gangs.”

In the place where his gaze was directed stood a man. He wore a dark suit that could by no measure be called refined. The man had a prickly aura to him, and a scar above his left eye. The only thing that seemed out of place about him was the banner he held in his hand. The banner representing the Lotz Hotel.

“Oh, the guy from yesterday,” Claiomh muttered next to Orphen.

Still smiling, Orphen asked the man who was staring straight at him, “So, slacking off? I was watching you. You didn’t pull in any customers, did you?”

“Are you enjoying yourself? From the fact that you’re still here, it seems there was an inn that would take you.”

“Are you Ronan? I’m just guessing, but the look fits. I heard you used to be a cop.”

He really was guessing, but he was fairly certain he was right. He noticed a distinct break in the man’s facade when he asked the question.

But he regained his composure quickly, tugging the edges of his mouth up

slightly into a smile. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just curious.” Orphen stood up straight, facing off against the man. “I’m sure you know this, but I’m staying with the Branch of the Forest right now. Eris told me about you, and I just wanted to meet you.”

“Seems to me like you don’t know how to talk to your betters, kid.” Ronan’s tone changed smoothly, without so much as an indication of the shift. His eyes were different now too. Before, he was just...

Just a man with that sort of air about him... Orphen thought to himself, meeting Ronan’s gaze. *But now...* He could see it clearly.

Ronan’s eyes now were unmistakably the eyes of a former police officer. A former cop—current gang member.

Slightly surprised, but opting to simply shrug it off, Orphen told him, “Looks like it wasn’t you I was fighting with last night. Are people talking about the arson by now?”

“I’ve heard about it.”

“Do you have a lackey who’s a little tied up since coming in this morning? If so, I hope you’ll tell him this from me: there won’t be a second time.”

“Hmm?” Ronan got a bit of a strange smile on his face. “I’m not sure I follow. You seem to think of us as some sort of crime organization, but there are no laws against solicitation, and I’ve personally never arrested someone from an inn going to another inn to suggest a business partnership.”

“Well, it depends on the kind of solicitation, doesn’t it? No matter how you guys see it, it’s the victim’s decision whether or not to sue.”

“Some would call relying on the law for protection another form of violence.”

“It’s a lot more peaceful than arson, if you ask me.”

They both stopped there, as if someone had called an end to their match. Orphen hadn’t started the conversation with the man for any particular reason, and Ronan seemed somewhat at a loss as to how to continue. That was what it felt like between the two of them.

Ronan took a calm breath. He spread his arms exaggeratedly and told Orphen,

“Very well. I seem to be at a disadvantage here. That inn hired you as a bodyguard. Do I have the right of it?”

“...I feel like it’s pretty different from that, but we’ll say that’s close enough,” Orphen answered, turning to Ronan and waving his hand.

They were silent from then on. Ronan left with heavy footfalls.

Orphen saw him off and, when he was sure the other man couldn’t see him anymore, let the tension smoothly leave his shoulders. He relaxed and shook his head. “Yeesh, I’m tired...”

After mumbling that, he turned around and found that Claiomh, who’d been quiet that whole time, was writing something in his notebook—she must have been quite bored.

“Hey, what are you doing?!” Orphen snatched the notebook from the girl’s hands.

“Aaah! What was that for?!” Claiomh complained.

Orphen ignored her and looked down at the notebook, then raised his voice even more. “Hold on, what are you changing these entries for?! Okay, you’ve put the two ends of an earpick as two different items on the list of things I’ve broken, but no matter how you slice it, *that’s* cheating!”

“What?! You were the one who said you could count things separately if they had different names!”

“—!”

“—!”

As they started another shouting match that didn’t seem like it would end any time soon, Orphen moved just his eyes, making sure that he could no longer see Ronan.

At the same time as the day before, in the same place, the second day of Orphen’s stay in the Ledgeborne hot spring town began.



Green walls.

Flowing bubbles.

A faint light—and beyond it, nothing.

Dull senses.

A world passing by beyond cloudy fluid.

Meaningless time passed... One year, two...and I endured it. I never grew used to the waiting.

I started looking up at the sky more, though there was no way for me to see it. Still, I felt like it would suck me up into it. At the very least, my feelings had already gone somewhere else long ago. As I looked up at the sky in the darkness, I asked a question.

How did this happen...?

Chapter VIII: A Gang with No Guts

Ronan had never walked so fast in his life.

He wasn't running, mind you, just walking. Running would have been out of the question. After all, who ran from a vicious beast? When people were really in danger, they didn't run, they walked. Still, he walked as fast as he could, like death was on his heels. He truly believed that.

His footsteps echoed down a hallway. The employee-only area of the Lotz Hotel, which was completely familiar to him now despite having only arrived here recently. He couldn't walk like this in a place where the tourists would be able to see him. The shift manager would give him hell for it.

And he certainly wouldn't be able to mutter, panicked, to himself like this. "Wh—Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What's going on?!"

The hallway wasn't too long. He came in through a rear entrance, passed by the kitchen, and arrived at the employee quarters in short order. Most of the employees of the Lotz Hotel slept in this room, Ronan included. And there was one other person who stayed here...

"Godol!" Ronan shouted, throwing open the door to his room. "I just got indirectly threatened by some kid with nasty eyes and a super villainous face! Godol, I had my suspicions, but did you seriously set fire to that inn?!"

The room wasn't a complete mess, but it was certainly lived-in. Clothes strewn about on the floor, scrunched-up blankets on the beds, indented pillows, an ink pot on a desk with no lid on it.

In the back of the room, on the bottom bunk of a two-tiered bed, there was a man curled up under a blanket. Seeing that man, Ronan stopped in place.

"GEEET UUUP!" He kicked the wooden frame of the bed, which leapt into the air.

The man, Godol, jumped to his feet in surprise. "Wh-What was that for... Bro?!"

“What do you mean, what was that for, huh?!” Pummeling the bed some more with the tip of his shoe, Ronan glared at his partner’s face. “Just answer me! This commotion about the fire at that inn, was that your—”

He got that far before his breath suddenly caught. It wasn’t that he’d stopped speaking, but that he’d stopped breathing. Quickly filling his lungs with air, he turned on his heel and rushed over to the door he’d left open. He poked his head out into the hallway, glancing down it, and closed the door. Then he took another breath.

He shook his head. He wanted to take a break in whatever way he could. That was how he felt. He wanted to bite his nails, wash his hands, gaze out the window, change his shoes and then wash them, water the flowers... That was how he felt. However...he couldn’t just take a break forever. That was...how he felt.

Ronan pressed his forehead to the door he’d just closed. The uneven surface of the door pressed in on his skin. He moved his fingers against the door’s surface and muttered, “S... Say, Godol. You’re my partner, right?”

“Y-Yeah... Bro.”

“Who am I?” He could tell his voice was cracking, but his partner didn’t seem to notice. Maybe he was just unobservant.

“Isn’t that obvious?” he answered sunnily. “You’re my Bro!”

“N-No... Not that... I... Right. Who was I five years ago?”

“Uhh...” This time Godol took a moment to think, but still cheerily answered, “A good cop!”

“Huh? Was I really good?”

“You were! You never bullied a petty thief like me! You were good!”

“I-I guess so...” He put both hands on his chest to steady his heartbeat and grimaced at the sound of some distant cacophony.

Ronan groaned in pain. “I dunno if it was because you didn’t have any guts or what, but you only stole pocket change despite being a serial thief, and it was a pain to take you into the station every time, and as a third-class officer at my

age I was never gonna get a promotion racking up minor points like that...”

“That’s not true! You were a generous guy, Bro!”

“Th-Thanks. Well, in any case...umm, let me just ask. You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“Course not!”

“Th-Then give it to me straight. You weren’t in the room last night, right? Were you...out somewhere?”

“I was workin’!”

His partner answered him with full confidence, and that far-off noise seemed to grow louder...

“We got yelled at by the boss yesterday, didn’t we?” Godol went on. “I didn’t mind it so much, but it bothered me that he yelled at you... I mean, you’re so good, Bro! So I thought I should do my part to make it easier for you, Bro!”

“H-Huh... I-Is that so?”

The noise was thunderous now, and he’d finally realized that it was in fact coming from his own stomach—at the same time as this realization, he felt a twisting pain spread out from that same spot.

The sound played a perfect harmony with Godol’s voice as he talked.

“Anyway, this is all that bitch’s fault in the first place! No matter how many times you go and talk to her, she always says the same cocky shit! She’s just like my grandma! So I got an idea, see? Of what to do to make someone like that listen to you!”

“I...see...”

“It’s really somethin’, Bro! Even you’d be surprised! See, with stuff like that, you just gotta shake ’em up a bit, right? So I went to the inn at night, with some oil. You’re surprised, right, Bro?”

“Uh huh.”

“So then, I splashed the oil all over that rotten inn’s front entrance!”

“Kh...” His stomach creaked, almost flipping over.

Godol's cheerful voice went on, "So then, I was about to set it on fire, but like, this weird guy kinda fell from the sky or—"

"Urrrgh..."

"He was this guy in black with nasty eyes, and his face was so scary I was like, 'I gotta get outta here'! But then he almost caught up with me, so I thought, 'oh boy, I've done it now,' and then, like, he was super strong, so I got the crap kicked outta me, and—"

"Gwaaaaaah!" Ronan shouted. He couldn't help it. In fact, it may have even been a scream. He held his head with both hands, letting out a cry even he couldn't really identify, and turned around, painfully aware of the tears on his cheeks.

He thrust his finger out at Godol, who was sitting on his bed, chatting with a smile. "Youuuuuuuuuuu—"

"Whoa, Bro, you're red-hot!"

"No! Y-Y-Y-Y-You came out with it, eh?! Stand up!"

"Yessir!" Godol leapt up and stood at attention.

"Cross your arms!" Ronan yelled.

"Yessir!"

"Clench your teeth!"

"Yess—" The second half of his "yessir" cut out when he clenched his teeth.

"Pull your chin back!"

"Yessir!"

"Doryaaaaa!" Ronan knocked Godol down with a punch.

Falling down loudly, Godol jumped back up and flapped his bloody lips as he yelled, "Y-You hit me! You hit me, Bro!"

"I sure did!"

"You hit me! And when I pulled my chin back, I bit my tongue really bad when I said 'yes'!"

“I got it! Next time I’ll have you clench your teeth after you pull your chin back!” Ronan yelled. “How’d you do something so fatal without even thinking twice about it?!”

“W-Was it bad? Was it bad?!”

“It was super baaaaad!”

“Wh-What was bad, exactly?”

“Arson is a crime, numbnuuuts! What are you committing crimes for?!” he shouted at the top of his lungs, but Godol was just blinking his eyes and pulling back as if he was truly surprised from the bottom of his heart.

“Huh? Going to another inn every day and barging in and threatening them, going, ‘do what we say~’ with a scary face isn’t a crime?!”

“Of course it’s not a crime! That’s a crime?! You think that’s a crime?! What part of that’s a crime?! Tell me right now what part of that you think is a crime!”

He spat all that out before stopping and taking a breath. When he stopped yelling, something cold seemed to race through his brain. He shuddered and groaned.

“Y-You... You idiot... If the boss finds out about this... That guy’s serious about this gang thing. What do you think he’ll do to us...?”

“What’ll he do? What’ll he do?!”

“Wait!” Ronan silenced Godol and closed his eyes. He strained his ears and listened. “Godol... Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A chill. There’s like a chill!”

“A chill?!”

“It’s like, you know. When your hair stands on end. I guess you can hear that...” Ronan muttered, sounding impressed. When he opened his eyes, he found Godol nodding in agreement.

Ronan quietly raised a finger. “As for what he’ll do to us...”

Godol shuddered in fright.

Ronan leaned forward and continued, "It's gonna be...really something."

"Really something, huh?"

"To be more specific, it's gonna be really cruel."

"That is really specific!"

"Meaning because *you* did something stupid, *I'm* gonna catch flak for it and because whoever gets in trouble for this is gonna have to go through something that's really something or that's really cruel, how am I supposed to get across to you how pissed I am, I know, *this* is how, raaaaah!" Ronan shoved Godol again.

Godol spat out more blood than last time, but he still leapt right back up.
"You hit me?! You hit me again?!"

"I sure did! And I'll do it as many times as it takes! I'll hit you a few more times before our conversation's done, and then when it's over, I'll hit you again!"

"I-Isn't that a little much?!"

"It isn't! In fact, it's not enough! Listen, there's only two reasons why I'm not killing you right now! The first is that killing someone's a crime!"

"I'm so glad we have laws!"

"The second is that if you die here, I'm gonna be the only one who's called to the pres's office later!"

All the emotion suddenly went out of him there. Ronan gave a little sigh. He shook his head, one hand on his temple.

"Umm," Godol asked timidly. "Is there nothing we can do, Bro?"

Ronan looked at him. He wasn't sure why, but he was feeling dizzy. How should he describe it...and was he even under the obligation to describe it in the first place? Ronan slowly thought, muttering to himself. What was this?

Friendship was probably something like this. He was fairly certain of that.

He was equally certain that he was feeling despair as he groaned. "N-No, I've done what I could...I think. Probably."

“What’d you do?” Godol asked, eyes full of expectation.

Ronan nodded. “Well, it was my old specialty. I tried to scare ’em off.”

“Your old specialty? What’s that?”

“Bluffing.”

“Will that work?!”

“That’s why I said ‘probably’!” he shouted.

Just then...

“Oho...?”

The voice came out of nowhere. With no warning or notice. It appeared to suddenly spring up into existence.

They tried to turn to where the voice had come from, but their first attempt was off. The door was still closed, and no one was there.

Their second attempt was just as wrong. There was no one in the window either.

For their third attempt...Ronan and Godol looked up at the ceiling, feeling like someone was trying to trick them.

The voice continued. “I see. I think I get the gist of things. As that ridiculous sorcerer who dresses all in black even in the summer continues to go about robbing poor souls of even modest happiness, you two are truly fatefully lucky for the hero, the Great Vulcano Volkan, to have coincidentally passed by at just this moment.”

“...”

“...”

What is this?

The grand question.

The voice had come from a figure crossing its arms and standing up tall. Looking down at them, full of confidence.

The figure had its feet on the ceiling, and was hanging upside down. It must

have been there this whole time, they just hadn't noticed it because of how small it was.

Ronan had no idea what it was. *I hate imagination...* he thought to himself.

He didn't know what it was, but he could imagine. It was...

A ghost...?

Ronan blacked out.





If left alone, sorcery will always go on a rampage. That was why it could never be left alone.

It had to be controlled, in other words. There were different degrees of course, but this was, basically, the number one priority for sorcerers: controlling their sorcery.

No matter how strong it was, power that wasn't controlled had no meaning. And that went for things other than sorcery, too. Emotions, intent, desires. All things had to be controlled, or so sorcerers thought.

However...

Orphen sighed. "How do I judge this?" he muttered to himself.

"What?" Majic must have heard him. He turned around to face Orphen from the stance he was in, the serious look fading from his face.

At the same time...the sorcerous compositions around the boy all vanished.

Compositions. Sorcery couldn't take shape without them. Sorcery without a proper composition was just nothing. Compositions were why sorcery looked like it drew forth power from complete nothingness. To be precise, there *was* something there, but without composing it, it would remain nothing.

Sorcerers were those who were able to perceive formless sorcery and weave it into a composition in order to manifest it into reality. All sorcerers knew this. Well, they should have been able to understand it. After all, if they couldn't, then they wouldn't be able to use sorcery.

Properly composed sorcery had practically limitless power, enough to overwrite the reality of the world. That was the sort of power Orphen saw around the boy. Compositions that Majic imagined and projected around him in the air. They made it perfectly clear what effect his sorcery would have even without him activating it. Of course, more skilled sorcerers were able to weave more complex compositions that couldn't be understood at a mere glance.

The two of them were out behind the Branch of the Forest Lodge. Majic was practicing in the large vacant lot that comprised the space behind the building,

and Orphen was watching.

“I guess you could call this a kind of talent...” he muttered. “How can you let your maximum strength out without even hesitating?”

“Huh?” Majic asked, uncomprehending.

Orphen thought for a moment before rewording what he’d said. “From your compositions, I can tell that you’re trying to utilize almost one hundred percent of your power. That in itself isn’t particularly difficult...anyone can do it. But usually, you’d hesitate.”

“...I see?” Majic said, untruthfully.

Orphen sighed again. He could feel himself frowning, trying to figure out how to explain in a way the boy would understand.

“I’m sure *this* at least you understand, Majic. Sorcery is fundamentally a dangerous thing. I shouldn’t even need to explain this. It’s just too much power for the human body to be handling. If you mess up your control even a little bit, it’s easy to lose your life for it. Every sorcerer is scared of that happening, no matter how experienced a caster they are. Actually, maybe I should say that people who don’t have that fear don’t live long enough to become experienced. Yet for some reason, you’ve got the power set to just as much as you can take without dying, and you don’t even seem bothered by it.”

“...Are you mad at me right now?”

Orphen shook his head. “No, I’m just struggling to understand.”

Majic pursed his lips. “Don’t you use sorcery for pretty stupid things though, Master? It doesn’t really seem like you’re worried about anything.”

“Well, I am. That’s why I don’t use too much strength,” Orphen said, waving his hand.

He formed a composition he didn’t even have to think about, imagining it in an instant and erasing it in the same amount of time. Majic saw it, of course, but he blinked his eyes as if he couldn’t grasp what it was for.

Yet again, Orphen sighed. “Basically, I make sure I can fix it if something goes wrong. That’s what I can’t understand. When I look at your compositions, I

wonder how I ended up teaching a suicide bomber. Sure, there are times when you need to use all your might, all the power that you have. But those times are the only times you should be doing something like that. If you screw up something that took all your strength and it backfires on you, how the hell are you planning on protecting yourself? If you scorch yourself without leaving enough power to heal your burns, you're screwed."

"So...what should I do?"

"Well..." Orphen looked up, searching for an answer. He wasn't sure how to explain it in a way that the boy would understand. The only thing he could come up with was...

"Get smarter, I guess."

"So?"

"...So what?"

He'd noticed Claiomh standing at the entrance to the backyard, however he frankly had no idea what she was doing there.

Like usual, she had Leki on her head, and she was watching Majic as he formed various compositions, trying out this and that. Majic had a scowl on his face as he weaved together and erased pointless compositions, even going so far as posing with each one. Some of them he didn't even have to erase since he couldn't maintain them in the first place.

Orphen looked down at the girl and waited for her to elaborate.

Claiomh reached out and pointed at Majic. "Well, he's been practicing really hard lately, hasn't he? But I can't tell if he's improved or anything, so I thought I'd ask you."

"Improved, eh...?" Orphen scratched his head, frowning. He patted Claiomh on the head as she looked up at him blankly and said, "C'mere a minute."

Orphen pushed Claiomh's back as a question mark appeared over her head, taking her out from the backyard and circling around to the front of the inn instead.

“What is it?” she asked.

Orphen stopped walking and furrowed his brow. “Say, Claiomh.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you met his mom?”

“Yeah.” She nodded casually.

Orphen glanced around, making sure Majic wasn’t nearby. There was no way he could be, since they’d left him in the backyard, but he just wanted to make sure. “What’s she like?” he asked.

“...Orphen...” Claiomh’s reaction was unexpected. A shadow of suspicion fell over her face. “You know, I always thought you kind of had a thing for older women, but isn’t your range a little too extreme?”

“What are you talking about?!” He couldn’t help shouting, but quickly cleared his throat. Claiomh was giving him a distrustful look, so he told her, “I just want to know what the person who taught him the basics was like. His mom had to have been a sorcerer, right?”

“I don’t know what to tell you...” While Leki skillfully balanced atop her blonde head, showing Orphen his belly, Claiomh scrunched up her face in a frown. She put a hand to her chin and said, “I never heard anything about her being a sorcerer. She was just a normal mom. Though I guess it’s kinda weird that she was living in the mountains like that. She got along with the monkeys real well, it seems like.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah. She had raw meat in her salads and stuff.”

“I don’t know how much help that’s going to be,” Orphen muttered, crossing his arms. He looked up and the repaired sign at the front of the inn caught his eye. The weather was sunny.

“He must have learned something about using sorcery before meeting me, but...not formally, or... I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Can you tell by looking whether it was formal or not?” Claiomh asked casually.

Orphen looked down at her with narrowed eyes. “You know, it feels weird to say this myself, but I got probably the most standard sorcerous training on the continent.”

“So, what, it was average?”

“...I don’t think training is supposed to be about novelty.”

“Huh?” Claiomh sounded surprised. “But I trained by hanging logs from the ceiling and hitting them, and balancing an egg on top of my sword and stuff.”

“That’s why you suck.”

“Hey! That’s mean!” Claiomh wailed.

Orphen ignored her and turned around. He headed for the inn entrance, intending to go lie down and rest, when...

“...Huh?” He suddenly stopped. “Who the hell tossed this here?”

“What? Hey, that’s mean!” Claiomh put a hand to her mouth and repeated the same line. “I wonder if it’s more harassment like the arson last night.”

The face of the guy named Ronan came to Orphen’s mind. *Harassment, huh?*

No... He shook his head. “I don’t think so. That guy’s a pro. He didn’t seem like any old punk. There’s no way he was just a fake, and I can’t imagine he’d pull such a dull prank at this point.”

Claiomh cocked her head and asked, “You mean the guy from earlier?”

“Yeah. He’s supposed to be a former police officer. But dispatch officers are elite forces that operate all through the continent. Any old idiot would never be...able to...become...one...”

“...Why’d you start mumbling?”

“No, don’t worry about it. It’s a long story.” Orphen shook his hand and cut the conversation short, feeling a wave of dizziness wash over him.

In that time, Claiomh seemed to notice something.

“Hey...” she pointed at the mud-covered litter left at the inn entrance. “Are you sure this is garbage?”

“...Huh?”

“Well, it has a hand.”

“A...hand...?”

He took a closer look after her comment. At a glance, it just looked like a pile of rags. It was pretty big, but probably not big enough that he couldn't pick it up. But it looked heavy. From certain angles, it also looked like something had been wrapped in ragged cloth and thrown out. Orphen had thought it was garbage. But there were round fingers poking out from under the pile, and the shape of them looked somewhat familiar to him.

On closer inspection, there was also a head he recognized, though at first he'd thought it was just another part of the mud-covered cloth.

On closer inspection, there was also a pair of thick glasses almost coming off the head's face that he recognized.

On closer inspection, the ragged cloth was actually a fur cloak, and now he was certain.

“...Isn't this a dwarf?” Claiomh said what didn't need to be said. And...

“?!” Orphen gasped as he looked down at the dwarf's—Dortin's body. He was holding something. Something long and thin, and made of metal.

He rolled the face-down dwarf over onto his back and took what the completely unconscious Dortin had been holding so closely to him. It was a sword.

A shortsword. It was covered in mud too, but the silver blade hadn't lost its metallic luster. Orphen was certain he'd seen this before as well.

“This is...my sword. It's in bad shape, though...”

The blade was bent like it had been struck against something incredibly hard. The edge was dulled in places too. The bend in the blade would probably take care of itself eventually, but the dulled edge would have to be sharpened manually.

“What happened to him?” Claiomh knelt down next to Dortin worriedly, wiping the dirt from his face. Leki was tilting his head atop hers.

“Well, they fell off a cliff yesterday...” Orphen murmured, rapping his knuckles against the blade. “Did it take them all this time to climb back up...? But why does he have my sword?”

“What do you mean?”

“It was inside the bag I lost yesterday. If they picked it up...it doesn’t really make sense, since I lost it after I threw them off the cliff.”

Dortin was completely limp, but his breathing was steady, and he didn’t have any obvious wounds.

Claiomh looked up from wiping his face with her handkerchief. “Should we bring him inside?”

“Guess so. The bath’s probably the first stop. We’ll have to clean him up if we want to do something about those scratches. Go get a blanket or something we can get dirty. I’ll carry him in that. Doesn’t look like he’s too bad off, so there’s no need for us to carry him and get dirty, too.”

“Right.” Claiomh stood and took off into the inn.

Left behind, Orphen scratched his cheek and muttered, “Geez... Why are these two always—”

It was then that he finally noticed. Something was off.

Huh...?

He glanced around. Realizing his mistake, Orphen was even more puzzled. He’d thought “these two” like it was completely obvious, but... *There’s only one of them here.* He didn’t see Volkan.

At the same time that he noticed that, “Nngh...” Dortin grunted.

“You awake?” Orphen asked Dortin, crouching down next to him, but there was no response. He must have made the sound in his sleep. Like he was having a bad dream or something...

“...er...”

“Er?” Orphen repeated. Still, there was no answer, and Dortin went silent again after that. He didn’t seem like he was sweating, but he looked pretty

weak. Of course, they couldn't feed him until he regained consciousness.

Orphen looked down at the silver shortsword again. The Razor's Edge, bent and broken.

"Nothing about this town makes sense. Maybe the east really is a land of evil and demons."

Right as he was muttering to himself, Claiomh emerged from the inn with a blanket in hand.

She was with a small woman. At first glance, Orphen thought it was Eris, but it wasn't. It was her mother. Her name...come to think of it, he hadn't heard her name yet. Not that it really mattered, he supposed.

He looked at them in silence until Claiomh jogged over and started answering questions he hadn't even asked.

"Oh, Orphen. That was fast, wasn't it? Umm, here. Sheena was just getting out some blankets she didn't need."

"Sheena...?" he asked, but he quickly realized that she was referring to the woman walking over to Dortin expressionlessly, who resembled Eris. Her mother.

"Hmph..." Sheena let out something like a sigh when she saw the collapsed dwarf. "Looks exhausted. I just cleaned it, but it looks like the bath will be getting dirty again. You never run out of work to do around here..."

Even as she grumbled, she swiftly wrapped Dortin up in the blanket. Glancing back at Orphen and Claiomh over her shoulder, she asked, "You gonna help or what?"

"Ah, err...yes." Orphen hurried over. Claiomh poked her nose over his shoulder as well.

Dwarves were extremely heavy for their short stature—it was a lot of work picking him up even between the three of them. Reluctantly, Orphen took the heaviest part, his upper body, while Sheena and Claiomh each took a leg. The dwarf's limp body sunk down no matter how they tried to carry him, as if resisting being picked up. Still, they did their best to hold his weight as they

staggered forward, when...

Orphen's eyes suddenly landed on Sheena's neck. Her collar was slightly askew because of the lifting they were doing and he could see inside it slightly. It was only for a second, so he couldn't be completely sure, but he could have sworn he saw a rather large burn mark there...

Sheena swiftly fixed her collar as she held Dortin, though Orphen wasn't sure if it was because she'd noticed his gaze. He figured it wasn't something he should ask about, so he decided to concentrate on the work. He could hear Claiomh cursing under her breath, apparently berating Majic for happening to be somewhere else at the moment.

Nothing about this town made sense...

Repeating his earlier thought to himself, Orphen sighed.

Chapter IX: Dead People Full of Life

Numbing heat.

Stinging cold.

The heat was what had killed him, and the cold was the wind from the land of the dead.

I felt the same things he had felt, just like we'd once shared everything.

I regretted it, of course. That was why I sang.

“Can’t bury you on this cold mountain. I can’t bury your corpse here...”



“The problem is that we don’t know where we are. Wouldn’t you say, Researcher Nosapp?”

“I suppose so...” Nosapp returned the same half-hearted reply he always did as he gazed at his familiar conversation partner. A man that now, he could say with certainty, he absolutely did not want to find familiar.

Conrad, the chief researcher, was, to be perfectly honest, not particularly gifted either as a researcher or as a boss. He could likely say the same thing about the man as a friend, but he decided not to dwell on that, as he’d never considered the man a friend in the first place.

The problem was that they didn’t know where they were. He was right about that, Nosapp thought with ample scorn.

It was a strange, creepy room. As for what exactly was strange about it, well, there was a stone bed in the center of the room, raised up from the floor.

“This is the strange thing, Researcher Nosapp.” Conrad gestured exaggeratedly as he spoke. “There’s a bed in the middle of the room! An immovable bed! What does it say about them that they so obstinately avoid any potential for remodeling? Something truly bizarre is afoot here. You could say we are having an encounter with the unknown right now!”

He would probably get his argument across better if he described it as just a rectangular section of the floor slightly raised up instead of a bed, Nosapp thought.

The walls of the room were all green. That went for the floor and the “bed” that was part of the floor too, of course.

The problem is that we don't know where we are, Nosapp repeated to himself. He could think of some additional problems as well: why were they here, where was the exit, how could they leave, and... *And...didn't I die?* he added with a shudder.

There were plenty of problems, really. You could even say that everything around them was a problem.

Where was this? He didn't know.

Why were they here? When they didn't even know where “here” was? How was he supposed to know that?

Where was the exit? Well, there was a doorway in the room. A doorway without a door. But an exit had to be connected to somewhere you knew. Your homeland, perhaps. If it simply connected to another unknown place, then you couldn't really call it an exit.

Didn't he die? He decided to just be thankful for the fact that he was alive...

“...That's assuming this isn't the afterlife, of course...”

“Did you say something, Researcher Nosapp?”

“Nope.” Nosapp replied in his usual noncommittal way, watching Conrad pace around the room restlessly and noisily.



“Hmmm...‘er’...‘er’...” Orphen repeated Dortin's sleep talking.

“Er.” Claiomh repeated the word. It wasn't even a word really, more just a sound.

Dortin hadn't had any particular wounds aside from scratches from tree branches or something similar. They'd put him to bed in an unused guest room,

but he was just tossing and turning, showing no signs of waking soon.

“Errand?” Orphen ventured, deciding to play along. He stood at the door, gazing distantly to Dortin on the bed.

“Error?” Majic ventured next. He was standing next to Orphen with a blank look on his face.

“I’ve got it.” Claiomh clenched her fist. “An erroneous error while out on an errand eradicated an errant ermine.”

“Yeah, that makes a whole lot of sense. Would you cut it out?” Orphen decided to cut that conversation off there.

“What?” Claiomh whined. “I had more, like eruption and eraser.”

“Getting a little heavy-handed at the end there, no?” chimed in Majic.

A short sigh cut through the air. Orphen glanced over and found Eris looking coldly—though not particularly more so than usual—at the tossing and turning Dortin.

Noticing his gaze, Eris turned and asked Orphen, “Friend of yours?”

Orphen decided to nod. “Well...you could say we know each other.”

“I wonder what happened to him,” she muttered.

Dortin was shaking his head left and right, sweating and muttering.

Orphen closed his eyes and answered calmly. “Last I saw him, I was throwing him off a cliff.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty standard goodbye for us.” Claiomh nodded.

“Is it...?” Eris looked between her and Orphen, her tone slightly unbelieving.

She picked up the cloak Dortin had been wearing and held it up. Dried mud fell to the floor. In the center of the dirty cloak was a ragged hole, like something had pierced through it.

“This doesn’t seem all that normal...”

“Hmm...” Orphen stared up at the ceiling. *Not normal, eh? That might be true.*

Just then...

It was a mere instant. A single, tiny unit of time. The smallest sliver that the human senses were capable of perceiving. Dortin had jumped up on the bed.

He leapt up like he was spring-loaded, glared at Orphen, and took off toward him!

“Waaaaaaaaaah!”

The shout came from Dortin. They couldn’t see his expression behind his glasses—Claiomh had insisted that they shouldn’t remove them, though who could say whether she had a reason for saying so or not. It was so sudden, Orphen wasn’t even able to put his guard up, so Dortin charged all the way across the room to him.

“Murdereeeeer!”

Orphen swiftly dodged to the side, though he had to admit he felt a little bad about it.

Dortin sped past him and, with all his excess momentum, slammed into the wall face-first. There was a terrible impact and a creaking sound like the very foundation of the building had bent. Orphen could feel a slight vibration beneath his feet.

He reached out hesitantly to Dortin, who was basically stuck to the wall, spread eagle. “H-Hey...?”

Everyone was so shocked, they couldn’t even react.

Meanwhile, Dortin twisted back as if nothing had even happened. Blood was gushing from his nose and a wound in his forehead, covering his face, and he was groaning quietly.

“You...murdereeer...”

“Uhh...” Orphen waved his hands, completely dumbfounded. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He caught a glance of Claiomh, Majic, and Eris’s faces then. At some point, the three of them had bunched up and were whispering about something or another.

“What did he kill...?”

“The sword he was holding was apparently Orphen’s.”

“Master’s deadly weapon... Maybe he was just pretending to lose it, and fooling us, too...”

“Why are you guys just believing him for no reason?!” Orphen shouted, pointing his finger at them. “And you!” He swiftly turned back to Dortin. “You can’t just start spouting ominous shit like that!”

“What’s wrong with calling a murderer a murderer?!” Dortin was quick to retaliate. He hadn’t wiped any of the blood off of his face, so he looked so terrifying as he went on that Orphen almost backed away from him. “Because of the things you do so flippantly every time—I always knew something like this would happen eventually!”

Tears mixed in with the blood on his face. He stomped forward, face mottled. “Ugh... My brother... My brother...!”

“Your brother...?” Orphen repeated blankly.

The air in the room seemed to freeze. Orphen’s mind went blank, the puzzle pieces coming together much too slowly.

“Umm...Dortin.” He slowly started.

“Yes?” Dortin replied sharply, still walking toward him.

Orphen had given up on backing away from him. “I just want to make sure here...”

“Yes?”

“So, you’re saying that Volkan actually died?”

“Yes!” Dortin shouted, stomping his foot on the floor. “Everything got messed up because you threw us off a cliff! We ran around for hours, and then...and then...my brother ended up like *that*!”



Orphen's arms dropped to his sides. He felt the expression leaving his face. He turned to stare blankly at Claiomh and Majic.

They both looked the same as him. Eyes wide, cheeks slack.

"Majic."

"Yes?"

"...Weren't you in the middle of training? Go finish."

"Okay." He replied plainly and scurried out of the room.

Orphen could see Dortin watching him go with clenched fists. "Umm..." he muttered, sounding taken aback, but Orphen ignored him and turned to Claiomh instead.

"Claiomh."

"Mhm."

"Go make sure Majic doesn't slack off."

"Okay." She answered just as plainly, with a nod of her head so slight that Leki didn't wake up, and strode off after Majic.

"Hey, wait a second!" Dortin exclaimed angrily. "What is this?! What kind of a reaction is that?!"

"Well, I mean..." Orphen narrowed his eyes. "I was wondering what you were gonna say, but you're actually claiming that raccoon died?"

"Are you sure you don't have the wrong idea about us?!" Dortin shouted even louder. "You have this idea that nothing will ever kill us, don't you?!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"It's not!" Dortin started waving his arms around in desperation. "I saw it with my own eyes! At the bottom of that cliff, there was this monkey thing that chased us around, and my brother's head...his head...!"

"What's with all the noise?" A new voice cut him off. Sheena was standing in the doorway holding a basin with water and a washcloth in it. Her mouth was a tight, displeased line.

“Uh, no, umm, I...” Dortin tried to go on, but she shut him up with a glance.

Staring him down with narrowed eyes, she said, “You’re dirty again.” Her tone was curt, and there was something about it that made it impossible to argue with.

“No, I, uhh... Mgh!” Dortin grunted when the washcloth was pressed against his bloody face.

Sheena wiped his face off with one hand, exerting a particular feminine strength, and glanced over at Orphen. “Get out. You said you were leaving today, didn’t you?”

“Mama...” Eris interjected, but Sheena didn’t seem to be listening at all. She shot hostile looks at all of them and said, “I don’t know what Eris told you, but it causes us problems if you stay forever for free. If you’re not even gonna cut wood, then you’re no help to us.”

“What?!” Claiomh shrieked, hands on her hips. “Have you forgotten that we put out that fire yesterday?!”

“*You* did no such thing.”

“Well, no, I didn’t, but...” Claiomh bit her thumb and went quiet at the retort.

The conversation came to an end there. An awkward silence muddled the air.

Orphen was the only one who hadn’t said anything. Naturally, everyone’s eyes moved to him, and he slowly made up his mind. *Well...alright.*

Orphen sighed and opened his mouth. “If that’s how you really feel, then I can’t just take advantage of you anymore.”

Eris had the most dramatic reaction. Her eyes were practically heartbroken, as if he’d betrayed her. Claiomh either seemed to be not following the conversation or not thinking at all, and Sheena was just wiping Dortin’s face without any change in expression. And because of that, naturally, Dortin couldn’t say anything.

After giving everyone a look, Orphen shrugged his shoulders. He took the broken shortsword out of his jacket. Because it wasn’t in its sheath, he’d wrapped it in a cloth and stuck it through his belt. “I’ll pay for the room.”

“How?” Claiomh asked. Leki yawned atop her head.

Orphen waved the sword a bit and said, “If they found this, that means the bag it was in is there, too. That means I can get my travel money back. Sorry, but we’re gonna have to stay here until I can find it. But it was pay when you leave anyway, right?”

“I can’t accept that.” Sheena shook her head stubbornly. She wasn’t facing him, but her eyes were pointed in his direction, glaring. “Our policy is to turn away guests who can’t pay.”

“Mama...” This time Eris clutched her apron frustratedly and raised her voice. “What are you saying? Don’t you understand? Lotz—”

“Keep quiet!”

Eris shut her mouth when her mother yelled at her.

Sheena glared even harder at Orphen. Her bloodshot eyes seemed to express all the emotions the rest of her couldn’t. “What’ll it be? If you have some collateral...”

“Collateral, eh?”

Orphen removed the cloth from the silver shortsword and concentrated, whispering, “I repair thee, Scars of the Sunset...”

The damaged blade was repaired soundlessly. The bent blade stretched back into place and all the nicks in it disappeared. Returning the repaired blade to its sheath, Orphen held the sword out to Sheena. “I think this is the most valuable thing we’ve got on us right now.”

“...Hmph.” Sheena put the basin on the floor, took the shortsword, and expelled a short breath from her nose.

Taking that to be an agreement (whether or not it actually was), Orphen took Claiomh and retreated from the room.

“My brother...!”

He could hear Dortin’s muffled voice coming from behind the washcloth as he left.



The elder Fien Lotz was considering how to express his mood today.

It had all started with something trivial. He'd received a little report. Then he'd heard a little rumor. It ended with an investigation, and as a result, he was almost completely certain.

He was considering now how to best express pure, unadulterated rage to another person. However...

Maybe I've just gotten old... he thought to himself cynically. *There's no need to fret over such a thing. Does an old person have to hold back their feelings of rage?*

In the end, he decided not to worry about it. He opened the door to his office and, catching an employee who just happened to be walking down the hall at the time, told him this: "Let those two know that I've summoned them."

From the frightened look on the employee's face, the elder Fien noted with satisfaction that he seemed to catch on immediately as to which two he meant. He made a mental note of the employee's face. Exemplary workers must be treated well.

He forgot the employee's face the moment he shut the door, but the elder Fien sat down in the luxurious chair in his office without worrying too much about that. He took a breath, relaxing, and the three-dimensional map of the area in the center of the room caught his eye.

Junior... he thought to himself as he gazed at the model. *Hurry and come home. While I'm still alive...for that time at least, you would love me, wouldn't you...?*

There were two framed pictures on his desk. An old one and a new one. The new one was nothing special—they'd just taken a picture of the old appearance of the Lotz Hotel before remodeling it three years ago. The old one was a picture of him and Junior. A picture from twenty years ago.

Junior smiled bashfully in the picture.

I always worried about how childish you were, even after you turned twenty.

But I was so happy...only having to worry about a thing like that. It didn't even matter, Junior. I just wanted to worry about you, so I went and found something to worry about. I know that now. Of course... He clucked his tongue. *You could say that woman only sank her claws into you because you remained so childish.*

He thought to himself as he gazed at the picture until there was a knock on the door. He reached out and turned the frame face-down onto the desk.

“Who is it?” The answer was obvious, yet he asked the question anyway. He was in the mood to hear the frightened voice come through the door.

However...

“Ronan and Godol, sir.”

It was Ronan's voice that he heard from beyond the door, but there was no tremor or fear in the words that he'd been expecting.

The elder Fien grimaced and, though he knew no one was watching him, thrust his arm out and bellowed, “Enter.”

He thought there would be some hesitation before the door was opened, yet once again his expectations were betrayed.

Ronan opened the door immediately and stepped into the president's office with Godol. Their shoes sank into the fluffy carpet. They walked in, their faces calm and betraying no emotion, and stood at attention. There was a moment of silence after they stopped.

If they had been scared, the elder Fien would have wanted to extend that silence. It was easy to reprimand those who were scared—you just had to remain quiet. But the two of them showed no indication that they were frightened.

Frankly, the elder Fien didn't like that. He glared at both of them in turn and said, “I heard something very interesting this morning, you two.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Ronan. He nodded serenely. Completely unfazed. No, like he was urging the elder Fien to continue.

Very well... I'll just take this to mean you're prepared for what will happen, he thought to himself, tensing his temples.

“It appears there was a small fire at the Branch of the Forest last night.”

“It appears so, sir.”

“I hear it was arson.”

“Yes, sir.”

The elder Fien did not think he was so old that he could forgive Ronan’s idle responses. And he did not think he was so old that he could endure them, either.

He decided to stop beating around the bush and just ask them: “Was it you two?” He also decided that he would pick how he killed them depending on how they apologized.

The elder Fien glared at the two of them, dark flames smoldering in his gaze.

However, neither of them responded. But they weren’t just silent. Their shoulders were trembling, some sort of sound coming out with their breaths as their chests heaved.

“Heheheheh...” They were laughing. Their mouths twisted as if they were unable to keep it inside.

“Heheheh... Hahaha...” Their laughs grew louder as they turned their backs to him.

“Haaah hah hah hah hah!” In the end, they laughed uproariously as they plodded out of the room. Even after the door closed, he could hear their laughter echoing down the hallway.

“...?” The elder Fien just watched them go, unable to even react to what had happened. As it echoed on and on, their laughter reached his ears, but not his brain.

“...Did they go mad?” he muttered blankly.

And silence returned to his office.



“Well, it’s him we’re talking about here, so I’m sure he’s not dead, but I guess just in case, the possibility might exist, even though really it’s impossible, but

still, I should at least take a look probably, so that afterward, when it turns out it was nothing, I can say that I went and looked, so I guess I'm off."

"...You really don't believe him at all, huh?" Claiomh said quietly—though frankly, she didn't seem to care all that much either—and Orphen shook his head.

"To be completely honest, if my bag wasn't there, I don't think I'd even go and look."

"You're so selfish..." That came from Dortin.

Orphen looked down and found the dwarf squaring his shoulders. He thought so at least, though the fur cloak made it hard to tell.

In any case, Claiomh didn't seem particularly bothered when she said, "Your bag meaning the bag you lost? I wonder if it'll be there."

"Well, it's a possibility. Of course, the punchline might just be that somebody found it, nabbed all the money from it, and tossed it off the cliff."

He peered down the cliff in question. It was the exact same spot he'd tossed Volkan and Dortin down the day before. The cliff face was sheer, the drop four to five meters. There was a forest at the bottom, and he couldn't see all that well into it.

The forest went on pretty far into the distance. It might have even extended all the way to the mountains. It looked like the branches would be so dense that you wouldn't be able to see the sky from inside the forest. He also couldn't see any rivers or hills, anything that would serve as a landmark.

"Still..." He screwed up his face and looked down at Dortin. "Why'd the two of you go into a forest like that in the first place? I mean, it looks like it's basically there just for people to get lost in. You probably could've found a way back up if you just went along the bottom of the cliff."

"I told you, there was this weird monkey that chased us!" Dortin repeated himself, indignant. "We were running away from it, and before we knew it, we were in the forest!"

"I mean, I'm sure there are monkeys that attack people, but was it really so

persistent?”

“It wasn’t just a monkey. It was...I don’t know, some sort of unnatural beast.” Dorton shuddered as if unable to maintain such an uncommon emotion for him as anger, or as if he’d just remembered something. Probably the latter, if Orphen had to guess.

“Hmm...” For the time being, he peered down to the bottom of the cliff again. “Did you bring the rope, Claiomh?”

“Mhm. Here.”

The girl brought him a thin rope. It was only thin in appearance, however. In actuality, it was woven partially of steel wire, and was incredibly sturdy. This wasn’t made for supporting one person’s weight. It was actually more like something for use in construction, when you wanted to keep large rocks or cliffs themselves from collapsing. It was about ten meters long. Eris had remembered that it was outside in the inn’s shed, and she’d gotten it out for them.

Orphen took the rope from Claiomh and tugged on it a few times to evaluate its quality. “Huh. Well, this thing’s supposed to hold rock in place for decades while exposed to the elements, so it’s pretty tough.”

“You’re gonna use that to climb down?”

“Yeah. It’d be easier if I had some climbing gear, of course.”

Something very rare happened then: Dorton interrupted the conversation. “Please be careful when you get down there!” His words were impassioned, in contrast to his pale face. “If you let your guard down, you could get sliced in half in an instant! I saw it happen myself! A h-human, split in half from the head down...”

He said all that, but then seemed to lose his voice. His teeth clattered together as his mouth flapped open and closed—he seemed to think he was still talking.

“You told me that already.” Orphen sighed and held his hand out to stop Dorton, who was panicking again. “So I’ll tell you the same thing I told you the first five times,” he said, sounding fed up. “True, the blade was bent and chipped, but it still didn’t look bad enough to have cut through a human being

in a single stroke.”

“I keep telling you because you keep not believing me!” Dartin finally found his voice again.

“Listen...” Orphen took a look at the dwarf. He was one hundred percent certain that Dartin wasn’t lying to him, but fear distorted people’s judgment, and panic muddled people’s memory. He didn’t want to go so far as to accuse the dwarf of embellishing, but his story didn’t add up to Orphen. He just shrugged and told him, “The human body’s not made of clay. There are bones and sometimes even muscles stronger than bones. Cutting someone in two, especially from one of the most sturdy parts of a human, the skull, isn’t a feat a monkey or a human or even a bear can do.”

“B-But—”

“And even if the monkey was some kinda monster that had an insane amount of strength like you said, the sword wouldn’t have held up. That thing wasn’t even made particularly well. If someone with the amount of strength you claim wielded it, the blade would’ve just come right off from the grip.”

“But I really saw it...”

“The observation skills of a person in the throes of panic are about as reliable as a pair of leather shoes in the rain. Sorry.”

“Ugh...” He didn’t seem satisfied, but he did seem out of arguments, so Dartin went quiet.

Orphen shook his head, not vigorously, but slowly. He took another look at the forest below and gave Dartin a pat on the head. “Well, one way or another, we’ll find out if we go.”

“Ugh...!” Dartin glared back at him, groaning in annoyance. He brushed Orphen’s hand away and furrowed his brow, shouting, “Fine! It doesn’t seem like you’ll believe me until we go there anyway!”

“Yeah... Huh? Wait...”

“Come on, let’s hurry! Let’s go! Come on!” Dartin raced to the edge of the cliff and, deaf to Orphen’s efforts to stop him, tumbled right off the edge of it.

There was a loud sound like something heavy had hit the ground a few seconds later. There might have been a scream, too.

“...Guess he can’t even wait until we secure the rope. I definitely believe that *something* terrible happened to him...”

“Yeah, it kinda seems like it changed his whole personality,” remarked Claiomh. She was tying the rope to a nearby tree trunk.

Orphen took the rope when she handed it to him and gave it a few heavy tugs to ensure it was secure. “...Huh.” He opened his eyes wide in surprise. “That’s pretty impressive. Did you learn how to secure a rope from someone?”

“Huh?” Claiomh opened her mouth blankly, like she had no idea what Orphen had asked her. Leki was cocking his head atop hers as well.

“Uhh, you know, securing a rope,” Orphen said, feeling a distinct sense of foreboding. “Like for climbing. You can’t just tie it a normal way.”

“I just did a normal shoelace knot.”

“...I’m gonna go re-tie it,” Orphen said lowly, striding over to the tree the rope was tied around. It really was tied in a normal shoelace knot when he got there.

“Huh? Why?” Claiomh whined like it was only her right to.

Orphen swiftly and silently undid the rope. He noticed there were no whines coming from behind him anymore, and suddenly Claiomh was right up next to him, watching him work.

“Hmm, so that’s how you do it... How’s that different from a shoelace knot, though?”

“...How is it the same?” Orphen groaned, looking not at Claiomh but up at Leki on her head. Sometimes the baby dragon was the most obvious indicator of Claiomh’s changes in mood, so it was easier to guess at her thoughts by looking at him instead of her.

Leki was patting at Claiomh’s head with his front paws, getting his bed ready. Orphen considered this deeply. Was Claiomh just feigning interest, or was Leki just sleepy? It was probably a fifty-fifty chance of either of them. Orphen smirked without thinking.

“Well, you don’t forget this kind of thing after you learn it once. And it’s not like I learned this was the one only way or anything.”

“Hmm.”

He decided not to let her uninterested reply bother him and tugged on the rope several times once again to test if it was tied properly this time. Since it was tied to a tree trunk, when he pulled it, the branches swayed and the leaves rustled like he was playing some sort of refreshing instrument.

“...Seems good,” he muttered, and walked off to the cliff with the other end of the rope.

However, sensing something behind him, he turned around. There was a girl there when he looked. The same blonde girl as always. She must not have liked him messing with her hair, because she was holding a sleepy Leki to her chest and watching Orphen closely.

He urged her with his eyes to say what she wanted to say.

“Hey, Orphen.” Her tone was awkward. Her eyelashes fluttered. She must have lowered her eyelids some.

“What is it?” Orphen scratched his head.

Claiomh went on, still awkward, “You’re not just using your bag as an excuse, and you’re actually worried about if that dwarf really died...right?”

“Why do you think that?” he asked, looking up at the sky.

It was clear and tall, just like it should be for the season. When you could feel the wind whirling high up above, it meant winter was almost here. He still couldn’t sense that, but it seemed like it wasn’t far off in the future.

He looked back down and guessed that Claiomh had been staring at him the whole time he was looking away.

“Mm... Well, I thought about it, and pictured what sort of face you’d make if you were thinking that. And you look a little anxious now...”

Orphen turned his back to her. He headed for the cliff, peering down at the uninhabited region below, rope in his hand.

He could tell from her footsteps that Claiomh was following him. He glanced back over his shoulder and found her closing one eye, Leki wagging his tail in her face.

“Claiomh, you said you wanted to be my partner, right?”

“Mhm.”

“And what do you think a partner is?” Orphen asked.

She didn’t seem all that confident, but she had an answer, at least. “Someone with about the same amount of skills, who you can trust?”

“Nope,” Orphen responded swiftly, tossing the rope down the cliff. The strong rope fell in spirals down the rapids of gravity.

He realized then that Dortin was embedded in the ground, unmoving after tumbling down the cliff earlier.

He pulled the rope hard one more time. It didn’t budge where it was secured to the tree trunk. Gripping the rope, he slid his feet down to the cliff face. When he had his posture ready to descend, he naturally found himself looking back at Claiomh.

She was still watching him with an unsatisfied expression on her face.

“Well, I’ll leave it to you, Claiomh,” he told her quietly. “I’m counting on you from now on.”

Claiomh’s face lit up. She just seemed relieved that the conversation had continued. A little flustered, she nevertheless put a hand to her chest and told him, “Yeah! You mean the inn, right? I’ll make sure to keep an eye out for that Lotz gang or whatever...”

Orphen slid his hands down the rope as he listened to her. He could hear the leather gloves he always wore scraping against the rope. A monotonous dirt wall filled his view. He couldn’t see Claiomh anymore if he looked up, but he could still hear her.

After a short pause, he could hear her say, “From now on?” sounding puzzled.

Orphen just smiled wryly and descended the cliff with the rope.

Chapter X: A Life with No Meaning

Orphen looked around and found that the forest was quite beautiful. Not the beauty of a garden, since it was nothing more than dense, green chaos, but there was a beauty in chaos, in random noise sometimes, and that was the sort of beauty the forest had.

If asked whether it seemed like a dangerous place, Orphen admitted to himself that his answer would be no. He took a glance at Dortin. The inconspicuous dwarf was peering around nervously at his surroundings, so much so that he would probably draw unnecessary misfortune to himself.

There's only one thing a frightened person can do: crawl under the covers and go to sleep. You mustn't think that you'll be able to pull through as long as you're careful.

Recalling those words, which were once said to him, Orphen asked himself another question. If fear is a threat that the heart senses, is panic a threat that the body senses? Or is panic just fear that couldn't be contained within the heart?

Fear could be fought against. You could make it submit, and control it. But panic had a mind of its own. There was no way to get it under control.

"We met someone deep in this forest," Dortin started fearfully. "And according to him, there's a vicious carnivorous beast in this forest, which is why it hasn't been investigated. And I think what I saw was that dangerous beast..."

"You know we're right next to a tourist town, right?" Orphen shrugged his shoulders, peering deeper into the forest.

He quickly found traces of Volkan and Dortin passing through. The grass was trampled down violently, continuing on into the forest.

It wasn't like he could do a real investigation, but he peered down at the flattened grass and muttered, "If there were rumors of a beast like that, I really think I would've heard them..."

“Maybe they’re kept a secret because it’s a tourist location?”

“But secrets, and rumors, those things tend to get out, you know?” He paused. “Somewhere an investigation team can’t get near... The guidebook said there were a few Celestial ruins around here. The only thing I can think is, maybe the investigators hid the danger...so the people of the hot spring town don’t know about it.”

“...Huh?”

Orphen ignored Dortin’s confused exclamation and went on. “In order to keep danger hidden...at the very least, people need to not be exposed to the danger.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if there’s even one victim, then someone will find out about the danger for sure.”

“What are—” he started, and then gasped. “You believed me that the forest was dangerous?!”

“Hmm... How should I say this...” Orphen hesitated, looking back at Dortin over his shoulder. He couldn’t stand up or turn his body either.

Dortin pattered forward, question marks written on his face. “Did you find something?”

That’s when he looked down at Orphen’s hand and all the color left his face.

His scream came a moment later, oddly delayed. “Eeeeeeeeeek!”

When Dortin yelped and tumbled backward onto the ground, Orphen just sighed soberly. “Well, what should I do about this...”

He had reached down with his hands to investigate the grass, when something had emerged from the ground with no warning and grasped his right wrist. An animal’s hand—it *did* look like a monkey’s hand.

The monkey’s hand was fixed around his wrist, tight as a vice, yet wrapped so perfectly around him that he almost couldn’t feel it.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Dortin was stuck to the ground, pointing at Orphen and

groaning.

Orphen just shook his head. “I sure didn’t think it’d be hiding in the ground...”

“Aaaaaaaaaah...”

“But what does this even mean? It didn’t even know that we were coming, but it buried itself in the ground waiting for us, somehow predicting that I’d put my hand here?”

“Aaaaah...”

“I just don’t buy it... But what should I do now?”

“How can you be so calm?!” Dortin screamed, finally finding his words again.

“I don’t know what to tell you. This is what happens when you miss your chance to be surprised.”

“I-Is it really?”

“Well, maybe not. Anyway, back off a bit, okay?”

Dortin didn’t need to be told. He was already backing off as he spoke to Orphen.

Orphen took a few seconds to calm himself, forming a sorcerous composition in his mind. In order to fill the composition with power, like slowly pouring water into dried cotton, he would need an incantation, but the incantation could be anything.

He sucked in a breath and began, “Fire—”

That’s when it happened.

The beast’s hand grasping his wrist slowly moved. No, it probably only looked slow because he was focusing so intently on it. In reality, it only took an instant. The beast’s hand shrunk, like a flower contracting into a bud. It squeezed tight around him.

He didn’t feel any pain. Not a bit of it. He just watched the event play out before his eyes. The moment the beast’s hand finished squeezing, Orphen’s hand fell to the ground like it was completely natural.

A shock went through his mind. Orphen swiftly canceled his spell. He had no

choice but to cancel it. He lost his concentration, and his half-formed composition crumbled to nothing. Normally, Orphen was confident enough in his skills that he could form a perfect composition even if someone was in the middle of beating him with a club, but...

What the...?!

The beast picked up his hand from the ground right away. And, after an instant that lasted all too long, another mere instant was all that awaited him.

A dark shadow passed by his face, and the beast's hand vanished from the ground. Following the afterimage, Orphen moved his gaze up.

The beast had jumped from the ground—no, from *inside* the ground—to a branch and had wrapped itself around it.

It did *look* like a monkey. Or maybe any beast with hands just seemed like it must be a monkey. But it couldn't *be* a monkey.

Its head jutted forward, maybe because of its weight. On the back of the monkey's head, there was a heavy-looking glass container sticking out of it, and inside the container was a light green fluid and a pink lump of meat that looked like a brain.

The brain didn't seem to be floating in the container. If anything, it looked like a brain that couldn't entirely fit inside the monkey's skull was swelling out from it.

The beast opened its mouth, displaying teeth that seemed too large for its body, and howled sharply, "Keekeek!" Maybe it was trying to threaten him.

Orphen howled back at the beast. "I release thee—" He pointed his handleless right arm at his target. "—Sword of Light!"

A beam of white light formed in the air and converged on the beast. It tried to leap from the branch to somewhere else, but the wave of heat swallowed it up with a roar. The flash enveloped its target and burst into flames, but the beast leapt down from the flames completely unscathed. It wasn't burned in the slightest. In fact, there wasn't even a speck of soot on it. And it faced Orphen and sped toward him!

“Damn you!” Orphen leapt to the side to avoid the monkey’s charge and pointed his left hand at it. He chanted quickly, “I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!”

The shockwaves burst, invisible, but the force of their rupture impacted his face, too. The grass was trampled, the leaves on the ground whirled up, and a mad wind danced around them.

And inside the explosion...the monkey was merely pointing its open hand at him. In the center of the hand, Orphen could see glowing letters.

It wouldn’t be quite right to say he recognized them—he couldn’t read them, after all. So he had no way of knowing what meaning the letters had, but they *were* familiar to him. They were letters he’d seen several times before in the past.

Wyrđ Glyphs...!

The monkey took off running, unconcerned with the shockwaves. In its path was Dortin, who was still on his rear on the ground.

Dammit! Orphen cursed and got back into a fighting stance. If he couldn’t destroy it, then...

“Dortin!” Orphen shouted. He only had a few more seconds.

“Yes?” Dortin’s response was strained as he stared at the monkey running his way.

“Don’t die.”

“Huh?”

Orphen had already composed a spell at full power. He summoned up all the power he was able to, pouring it all into his sorcery.

The monkey paid him no mind, merely holding out the glyphs on its hand as it ran. Orphen focused his strength on that hand.

“I end thee with my contract—Holy War!”

Fwoom! Light enveloped the monkey once more. But it wasn’t like the light from before—this was *just* light.

Or maybe it was only the illusion of light.

There was no meaning in the light itself, and it likely wasn't even necessary. But when the flash subsided, the monkey's whole left side, its arm, shoulder, and chest, had all been destroyed.

The monkey's momentum carried it right up to Dortin, where it fell over.



“Waaaaah!” Dörtin screamed belatedly. He backed up, panicked, from the monkey’s corpse and stuttered, “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

“Umm.” Orphen did his best to guess what Dörtin was trying to ask and gave an answer to the panicked dwarf. “If you’re asking what I did to beat it, I destroyed its information, removed the origin of its existence, dissolved it of its meaning. If you’re not concerned with the mechanics, you can just take it to mean I used a sure-to-kill technique...though I don’t know if it really counts as one, since it had about a fifty-fifty chance of succeeding. A more skilled caster probably wouldn’t miss or fail in their control as much, but that’s about the best I can do.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

“What, that wasn’t it? Uhh... Where’d it come from, then? I’d like to know the same thing.” Orphen turned around as he spoke, eyeing the ground the beast had leapt out from.

He frowned. There was no trace at all that the beast had emerged from the ground. The dirt wasn’t dug up at all and the grass wasn’t flattened, either. It looked exactly like it had a few moments ago.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—” Dörtin was still going. Apparently, Orphen had been wrong again.

Orphen tried to scratch his head with his right hand, realized there was nothing there under the wrist, and crossed his arms instead.

“What was the monkey doing here? Well...it seemed like it was lying in wait for us, but I’m not sure how it knew we’d be coming here.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

“Huh? That’s not it either? Well, what is it, then? Mmmh... What can you do to repay me?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

“No, I knew that wasn’t it. What else is there? Why don’t we keep going at this pace?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

“Maybe it’s actually something like, what are you doing losing your cool over something like this?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh... Wh...” Dortin’s stuttering finally stopped. He was making a face sort of like when your hiccups suddenly go away. Just sitting on the ground, staring into space vaguely.

Orphen rolled over the remaining half of the monkey’s corpse with his foot and took back his hand, which the monkey was still holding. From the torn-off wound, something red dripped like melted cheese.

“So what was it you wanted to say, anyway?” Orphen asked the still dumbfounded Dortin.

“Wheeew...”

“What, it was just a sigh?”

“No, that’s not important right now!” Dortin leapt up and started walking toward Orphen, but stopped halfway there. “U-Umm...” He pointed. “Is that really your hand?”

“Huh?” Orphen held up his right hand and showed him. He looked it over himself and decided, “Yeah, it’s my hand.”

“I-It ripped it off?”

“Hmm. Seems like it.”

“Umm... Can I ask a question?”

“Shoot.”

“I said this earlier too, but how can you be so calm?”

“...” Orphen furrowed his brow and thought. It was true: when his hand had come off, he was about to go into shock. But he hadn’t. And even if someone asked him why that was now, he still couldn’t really explain it.

He thought about it for quite a while before giving Dortin the first response that had come to mind: “Because it’s weird.”

“Weird?”

“I mean, this is clearly strange, right?” He held his torn-off hand even closer to

Dortin.

Dortin recoiled from it, but Orphen ignored his disgust.

“Look closely.”

“Huh...?”

“My pointer finger,” Orphen said quietly.

The right hand, which should have been ripped completely off of Orphen’s arm, was dexterously bending and extending its pointer finger.

“...Does it hurt?”

“I don’t feel a thing.”

Orphen was sitting on one of the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, staring down carefully at his hand once more.

He sighed, finding this all too strange.

His right hand. It was his right hand. Not something you tended to study so intensely in normal life. He’d done so once before in the past when he was told to sketch his own hand, but the hand he’d studied at the time had been his left, since he couldn’t look at his right hand and sketch at the same time.

Maybe your dominant hand showed all the things you’d done, all the things you’d learned before. If that was true, then maybe there was meaning in studying it so closely. So he thought as he turned it over, looking alternately at his palm and the back of his hand. It was just a normal hand...at least, he thought so, anyway.

Among those who learned martial arts at the Tower, there were very few of them, but some of them trained their fists themselves. The reason they were in the minority was that if you were only after destructive power, it was faster to just rely on sorcery. Actually, whether it was physical or sorcerous strength, there weren’t many who focused on destructive power in the first place. That was because, just living normally, it was basically impossible to get into a battle where you could do nothing but destroy your opponent.

In this respect, Orphen had been in the majority. He’d never trained his fists.

He'd never sought destructive power before. But the reason for that differed from the vast majority of sorcerers. The reason he hadn't trained his fists was because he was only at the Tower until he was fifteen years old. Forceful training like that to modify the body was only allowed when one had matured more. And the reason he hadn't desired destructive power wasn't because he thought it was impossible he'd ever get into a situation where he needed it. It was because his experiences up to that point had taught him that destructive power wasn't what was truly necessary.

His right hand.

He would probably say it was a large hand. He wasn't sure who he was comparing it to, that's just what he thought. He hadn't intended to train it or anything, but the skin was still thick in some places. He was strongest in his fingertips. He was confident he could put them through a thin wooden board if he tried. There were several scars on the back of his hand. Why did scars fade so easily from the palm of the hand but stay so easily on the back, he wondered.

"...But did it...really get torn off?" Orphen wiggled his fingers—the fingers of the torn-off hand—and glanced at Dortin.

Dortin was watching him disgustedly. "How are you moving that?"

"I'm just moving my fingers normally... Don't you think the wound is weird, though? Here." He looked down at the wound.

Both wounds, on his arm and on his severed hand, were the same. There was no bleeding. Or rather, what he had thought was bleeding wasn't. Something was dripping in globs from the wound like melted cheese. It was red and pink, so it could have been the color of blood and muscles, but...

Orphen cocked his head, uncomprehending. "At first, I thought it was burned off, but there's no burn. It just seems like it's melted. I think I don't feel any pain because the nerves are still connected—that's all I can think, since I can move my fingers still, too."

"B-But your hand is torn off. Only the nerves are still attached...?"

"That monkey was using Wyrd Glyphs. Nothing really surprises me when it

comes to Celestial silent sorcery.”

As he spoke, Orphen slowly moved the wound on his hand closer to the wound on his arm. The dripping part got close enough to touch the other wound, and...with the suddenness and swiftness of a reptile, the melted part sucked into the other wound. A second later, his right arm was back to normal.

He clenched and opened his reattached right hand, then shook it. Nothing about it felt or looked the least bit strange.

Showing Dortin his good-as-new hand, Orphen shrugged, a wry smile on his face. “See?”

He stood up, ignoring Dortin, who was staring up at him with his mouth wide open. Stretching, he said to Dortin, “Your story about the human getting cut in half is starting to sound more believable.”

“Huh...” Dortin said, either uncomprehending or just meaninglessly expelling air.

Orphen decided to just keep talking until the dwarf understood him. “This is just a theory, but I think the Glyph on that monkey’s hand was the same type of sorcery as the spell I used earlier. It changes the meaning of matter. The most I can do is destroy the meaning, making it so the matter doesn’t exist, but Celestial sorcery could separate things that normally have to be connected in order to function, or make the ground permeable in order to hide inside it. It probably blocked my sorcery by making it permeable, too.”

He grinned and added, “With a power like that, it could probably use my shortsword to cut a human in two or cut off the head of that stupidly tough raccoon.”

Dortin seemed to finally hear him then. His brain must have been paralyzed from the influx of information. His face lit up. “Then, my brother is alive?!”

“It’d make sense.” Orphen looked up vaguely. “Well, what we’ve figured out is these monkeys’ method, not their goal. There’s not much we can say until we know what it is they’re doing here in the first place.”

“You...You think so? I guess so...” Dortin groaned forlornly.

Looking down at the now unmoving corpse of the beast, Orphen didn't think there was anything else he was going to learn other than what he'd surmised so far. Still, he looked down at it again anyway.

Obviously, there was no way a creature like this could occur naturally. It was likely a servant created by Celestials—Weird Dragons, Nornir. Their sorcery was supposedly unable to create life itself. In exchange, the powerful dragons often modified lifeforms for specific purposes.

"Is this...something like that? I feel a little bad about this..."

"I suppose so..."

Orphen approached the beast's corpse after his muttering. He knelt down and peered at it. He hadn't moved it at all, but the tank attached to the beast's head made a heavy *gloop* sound. He stared down at the face of the dead beast. There was no light in its eyes. They just remained open, cloudy and reflecting nothing.



Eris emerged from the greengrocer at the same time, in the same way as she always did. She put the usual vegetables in her bag, all too aware that they would never change, and like always, headed down the same street. After taking three steps from the store, she quietly sighed.

There was no meaning in the number of steps. She just didn't want to sigh right after leaving the store, in case the people inside heard her. Two steps after leaving the store, she figured she would bother people if she stopped there, and at three steps, she figured that that concern was pointless and sighed anyway.

What the sigh was originally supposed to be for was also meaningless.

Thinking about the money she'd just paid, she peered down into the bag made of plain cloth—it was roughly made, but that probably didn't matter, since she was just using it to carry vegetables. Radishes, carrots, burdock, lettuce, potatoes, tomatoes, lotus root, spinach. After looking down at them, she realized she hadn't actually thought about what she'd use them to make. She'd just entered the store and plucked them off the shelves in the order she'd seen them.

Well, it's probably fine... Mama's the one who's going to be making dinner anyway. If she just handed them over to her, she was sure her mother would figure it out.

She decided to stop thinking about it and walked off again. Worrying about things like this was stupid. She did the same thing she did all the time, meaning today would end the same way it always did, without incident. There was no way for anything else to happen.

Peace always brought with it a certain discontent, but as long as that discontent didn't grow to be too great, it served as a good enough means to avoid boredom. So she thought, sighing once again.

"What is it..." she muttered to herself, quietly, of course, so that the people walking by her wouldn't hear, "that I want to do, I wonder..."

Any number of little things came to mind. First, shoes. In this hot spring town, with no pavement, shoes were a consumable product. But sometimes when customers came and she was cleaning the entrance of the inn, she'd see people wearing high heels that looked almost like toys, or enamel boots that matched the color of their clothes, or sandals that were just strings that she didn't even know how to wear. And when she saw them on other people, she thought that she should be able to own things like that too.

And it wasn't just shoes. She wanted bags and clothes and hats too. And every so often, she should be able to eat something for dinner that wasn't her mom's food, eaten at the same table as the guests.

When she made it close to home, she stopped. She thought she could hear someone arguing.

The voices sounded familiar. She ran forward and turned around a corner to find...

"I'm telling you if you want to get past me, it'll be over my dead body!" A blonde girl was shouting so loud it might echo out all through the town. "Get lost! And just so you know, I'm not just saying this 'cause Orphen's backing me up! I can chase you guys off all on my own!"

"...Claiomh?" Eris spoke the girl's name. It wasn't often that she remembered

the name of a guest. But the girl in a pink dress standing imposingly in front of the Branch of the Forest Lodge—Eris’s home—was definitely the guest who had come to stay with them yesterday. She stood with a black puppy on top of her blonde head, brandishing an impressive-looking sword. She hadn’t drawn it from its sheath yet, of course.

And the figures she was arguing with were... If anything, these two were much more familiar to Eris, she admitted bitterly.

““Backing you up’?” a man in a dark suit with his usual civil smile said to Claiomh. He didn’t seem all that concerned about the weapon in Claiomh’s hands, either because he figured a weapon in the hands of a child wasn’t a real threat or because he knew he could do something about it if she ended up using it. He shrugged his shoulders and continued, “I heard that man was spotted leaving town a little while ago. Am I wrong?”

“He just left for a little bit!” Claiomh shot back sharply. “And I just said that doesn’t matter anyway! Or what? Do you think I’m not up to the task or something?!”

“You could say that...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! A-NY-WAY! Why don’t you just scream and run around and go, ‘we’ll get you for this’ and trip on your own two feet already?!”

“That’s an awfully specific request...”

“So?! They’re gonna get even more specific now! Like, stretch out all your fingers and shake them around and pull in your chin and start sprinting!”

“Hmm...”

“Hey, you brat! I was bein’ nice and listenin’, but you’re goin’ too—” The one who’d started yelling was another familiar man in worn-out mountain climbing clothes. He always showed up as if in a set with the man in the dark suit. Eris didn’t know his name, though.

“Cut it out, Godol!” The man in the dark suit, Ronan, stopped the other man. He’d called the other man’s name, so that must have been Godol.

In any case, Claiomh didn't pay that any mind. She barked out a short laugh, put a hand on her head, bent down a little, and stuck her tongue out at Godol.

Godol got even more angry at her and Claiomh just raised her voice. "What're you yelling for, huh?! I bet you're just the type who can't even talk to people who aren't afraid of you, aren't you? Well?"

"Wha...?!"

"Well?!"

"You...!"

"Well, well, well?!"

"Urgh..."

It was obvious to anyone around them that Godol was being pushed back by Claiomh's words. He was sweating, his clenched fists trembling.

"Don't..." Godol slowly began as everyone around him turned to look his way. "Don't mock me. You think I'm just bluffing? Well, let me tell you... You're wrong if you think I can't talk to anyone who's not afraid of me..." He said all that with his voice trembling. Then he raised his face and spat the rest out: "I kowtow to those people just like I should!"

"You are so sad..." That came from Ronan.

Claiomh ignored Ronan and cut in between the two of them, pointing her finger at Godol and shouting, "Well, I'm not afraid of you in the least, so why don't you kowtow to me, huh?!"

"Don't be stupid!" Godol took a pose just as exaggerated as hers and shot back, "Like Godol the Foul Runner is ever gonna kowtow to someone who looks obviously weaker than him!"

"Godol..." Ronan was shaking his head piteously behind the other man. He let his shoulders droop as if any more of this would be meaningless (and what else could it be?) and said, "Very well... We'll head home for the day, little miss."

"We're goin' home, Bro? C'mon, we can take this kid—"

"What do you wanna do? Smack her around and walk past her? Are you

stupid? Come on, let's go."

Ronan threw his hands up, spun around, and made to leave. That was when he noticed Eris. He and Godol both made eye contact with her, then looked away. They walked off without exchanging any words.

Eris was left standing there in a bit of a daze. She came back to herself when she heard a commotion. Claiomh was running over to her.

"Eris, you went shopping?" the girl asked her like they were close friends.

Eris just nodded and showed her the shopping bag, not seeing any particular reason to let it bother her. "What'd they come for? It's not their usual timing..."

Normally, they'd come for their recruitment spiel before the carriages arrived at noon—since it wouldn't be smart for them to cause a commotion after the tourists arrived in town and were in the mood to go out for walks. But it was around time to get dinner ready now.

"Hmm?" Claiomh returned her question with a sound of the same tone, clearly not putting an overabundance of thought into it. "I dunno, but they wanted to see the model inside the inn."

"The map...?"

That didn't make any sense. If you peered into the inn from outside, you could easily tell there was a three-dimensional map in the hall, so it wasn't strange that the two of them knew it was there, but that meant you could look at it from outside just as easily. Eris had no idea why you'd want to go out of your way to see it up close.

"Anyway..." Eris frowned. She had no idea if there was any point in saying this to a girl who wasn't intimidated by Godol's yelling, but she had to say it. "I asked your friend to take care of those two... Don't do anything too dangerous. If anything happened to you..."

"It'll be fiiine."

"Even with a sword, it's still dangerous. Please, don't do anything to provoke them. They're the type of people to commit arson."

Claiomh seemed a little cowed by that—"seemed" being the operative word.

Apparently, she was actually only thinking for a moment. She quickly raised her head and asked, “It was those guys who did it?”

“Huh? Well...I think so. I don’t have any proof, though.”

“Hmm. They didn’t really seem the type, though,” Claiomh commented, both hands behind her back, still holding the sword.

Eris just went quiet for a moment, unsure of how to respond to her. Suddenly sensing a figure behind her, she turned around to find her mother there. She seemed to be walking the same path Eris had come back by.

After approaching close, Sheena glanced at Claiomh’s sword and looked Eris over. She walked over wordlessly and thrust her hand out at Eris.

Eris, also wordlessly, handed the shopping bag over to Sheena. Her mother started digging through the items inside it. Curious, Eris asked, “Mama, did you go somewhere?”

“What’s that?” Sheena asked without looking up from the bag.

“Well, it’s time to make dinner, isn’t it...? But you just came from over there...”

“How’m I supposed to make dinner without any food? I went to get you since you were taking your time. Still don’t have any brains in that head of yours, do you?”

“I suppose not...” She wanted to protest at her mother’s cold words, but she just agreed instead.

“That’s not very nice!” Claiomh suddenly interjected. “You don’t have to put it like that, do you?”

“It’s fine.” Eris reached out and signaled for Claiomh to stop.

The girl turned her way with a scowl. The black puppy on her head also seemed to be squinting its round eyes as much as it could. “But...” She pursed her lips, but was interrupted again, this time not by Eris.

“Eris.” It was Sheena. She looked up from the shopping bag and let out an utterly exasperated sigh. “You only bought vegetables again?”

After a short silence, Eris uttered, “Ah...”

Come to think of it, since I wasn't thinking at all...I only went to the greengrocer.

Chapter XI: Memories That Cannot Be Recalled

There are things you need to be careful of when you're walking in the forest. It's not enough to simply try not to get lost.

Maybe that wasn't true, but Orphen thought he should be prepared for at least that much. He couldn't even see the sky, let alone the distant cliff, because of all the trees in the way. And because they towered up around him at random intervals, he wasn't able to walk in a straight line. The mountainous paths made it harder to keep track of the distance he'd walked, and having to move aside and step over the underbrush ate away at his stamina. Plus, since this was untrodden territory even for the locals, there wasn't anything he could use as a map.

"There's really no way to not get lost out here..." Orphen muttered glumly.

"You think so?" Dortin responded. He was managing to keep up behind Orphen.

Without stopping or turning around, Orphen went on, "I mean, if you walked through here without stopping, never getting tired or losing your sense of direction, you'd basically have to be an animal."

"Well, I suppose so."

"How long d'you think we've been walking?"

"I don't know, but...maybe like an hour?"

"Hmm... I think it's about time for the sun to be setting...maybe."

"Umm...we only got attacked after nightfall yesterday..."

"Urgh..." Orphen couldn't think of anything to say, so he just groaned.

In actuality, he had no doubts whatsoever about them getting lost. It was only a natural outcome. It was practically impossible to not get lost in a forest with no trails. And it was entirely possible you could vaguely choose a path that seemed easy to walk on and end up going in circles forever.

What he couldn't understand was...

"How'd you even get back?" Orphen asked, brushing a leaf off of his face.

"Huh?" Dortin sounded taken aback.

Orphen turned to look at him over his shoulder. He had his mouth wide open like he didn't understand the question.

"I mean," Orphen rephrased himself. "You were running from that monkey in this forest, right? I'm kinda impressed you made it out."

"Well...I was kind of absorbed in it, so I don't really remember..." Dortin responded, looking up and putting a hand to his chin. "And how did I get up that cliff, too? We only came into this forest because we couldn't get back up it."

"Hunh..." Orphen furrowed his brow. "...Wait, what do you mean you couldn't climb it?"

"Well, isn't that obvious?" Dortin asked.

"I mean, I guess, but... Well, how did you make it up to the hot spring town, then?"

"That is...the question, isn't it...?" Dortin tilted his head as if this was a curious puzzle and not a personal experience of his.

"And how'd you find out what inn I was staying at? Not that I wasn't curious about that before."

"Huh? Huh?" It seemed Dortin's questions were only growing as Orphen asked his. He suddenly snapped as if coming to a realization. "Oh, what about this? Maybe there's a shortcut or a secret route to the town and in my blind panic I just happened to take that?"

"That gets around the cliff maybe, but it's not a reason for you to be collapsed in front of my inn. Was that just a coincidence, too?"

"...I think there can be a coincidence like that once in a person's life, don't you?" Dortin said with a completely straight face.

Orphen just sighed. *Well, it's not like thinking about it's gonna solve this one.*

He hadn't stopped walking while they talked, but since he was looking over his shoulder, their pace had dropped a fair bit. He returned to his earlier speed and continued to walk forward. Although, humans weren't really capable of walking perfectly straight, so who was to say whether his current "forward" was the same direction he'd been heading in this whole time.

Feeling some vague sense of wrongness, Orphen decided to ask Dartin something. Or maybe he was just talking to himself. "Have you heard the saying that it's only fools who doubt coincidences? Well, according to my Master, those who don't doubt coincidences will never discover fate."

"Aren't those kind of the same thing, though?"

"Yeah. But still, I think I believe the latter," Orphen muttered as he walked through the mulch. "I dunno if I'd say I believe in fate, but this world's so complicated, it seems like simple coincidence would be rare. As coincidences build on each other, they become closer and closer to fate. Round up a whole lot of them and I think you end up with a key. And with that, I think it all becomes clear. But I can't find that key. That's sort of how I feel at the moment."

"Then, do you think it was fate that my brother borrowed money from you?"

"That's a tough one." Orphen thought for a moment. "Throw a ball in the air and it falls down. That's just fate, right?"

"Yes."

"So if you throw a ball at a target ten meters away, do you think it's just coincidence how many throws it takes to hit the target?"

"Is it not?"

"Maybe it is, sure. But if you keep throwing balls, eventually, you'll definitely hit it. And I think that fate's more important. I don't think it's a question of me lending the money and you guys borrowing it. If I hadn't lent it to you, I'd've lent it to somebody, and if you guys hadn't borrowed it from me, you'd've borrowed it from somebody else. But the whole thing together is fate."

"I'm not really sure if I get it or not." Dartin didn't seem all that satisfied. "But I want to clarify that it was my brother who borrowed money from you, and I

had nothing to do with it—”

“We got off-topic. Anyway, what I wanted to say was that even if each little thing is a coincidence, when they pile up, I think there’s a reason for that.”

“You don’t have to rush to get back on-topic. This is important. It was just my brother who borrowed money from you, so my brother is the only client of yours—” Dortin spoke quickly, walking quicker to catch up with Orphen too.

In return, Orphen picked up his pace as well, though he couldn’t walk all that fast in the forest. Feeling the grass slap against him as he rushed through it, Orphen went on, “In any case, that’s why you have to be aware of the issue—”

“I’m just trying to tell you that I have nothing to do with my brother’s debt. Are you listening?”

“That might sound like an exaggeration, but basically the important thing is to not stop thinking. No, maybe that’s the exaggeration.”

“Umm...”

“...”

Orphen suddenly stopped. A second later, Dortin slammed into his back.

There was a moment of silence. They spent the amount of time it took Dortin—who seemed to have hit his nose—to get himself back together in silence.

Then Orphen chuckled and turned around. “Dortin.”

“Yesh?” Even his voice sounded different. He must have really done a number on his nose.

Orphen spread his arms in an angelic pose and slowly told the dwarf holding his hands over his nose, “Let me teach you another saying.”

“Ogay.”

“This is a very important saying. The more creditors you have, the better.”

“...I think that way of thinking is a time bomb.”

“Ha ha ha. You won’t fool me.” Orphen looked away and laughed, then took a look around.

They were still in the same old forest. In fact, they might just be going around in circles, he thought with a wry smile. The problem with that feeling was that there was no way to be sure until you got out onto a path you actually knew.

The standard practice when you got lost was to stay in one place and wait for rescue, but it was laughable to expect aid from anyone in their current situation.

...Guess there's nothing we can do but keep walking and believe, huh?

Believing in yourself was the hardest thing to do. Orphen touched a nearby tree trunk as he thought slogan-like thoughts. He had a feeling there had been a tree that looked like this a little while ago, too. And there was no guarantee it wasn't in fact the same tree.

"...I didn't realize since it's so dark in here, but..." Dortin started ominously. "It looks like the sun is setting." He was looking up at the sky, an anxious frown on his face.

The sunlight filtering in through the branches above them was starting to fade. If the sun fully set, they would really be stuck. They'd just have to settle for being truly lost.

For the time being, Orphen held his hand up and recited in a whisper, "I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits..."

Several white orbs of light burst into existence atop his hand. The orbs illuminated the area around them, drifting upward to rest at around head height.

Dortin looked up at the lights and muttered, "Yesterday, we were attacked at night when we stopped to rest..."

"Well, that might be faster... That's assuming of course that there are more monkeys than the one before, and that there isn't actually any real danger in being attacked..."

"You were talking about being aware of the issue before..."

"Hunh?"

"What's that monkey even doing in the first place? You said you thought it

was a beast modified by dragons, but they wouldn't do that for no reason. So it must have a purpose, right?"

Not necessarily, Orphen thought to himself. Out loud, he said, "In hundreds of years—well, maybe dozens—far in the future, when humanity is wiped out on this continent, some other race might come here and say the same thing about us, you know. 'Hm, this ancient species decided that after three swings, you're out. There must be some reason for that.'"

"Then you think there isn't a reason?"

"Nah, I just thought I'd mention. I agree with what you said. It's just..." Orphen threw his hands out. "I don't think we'll find the answer by thinking about it. The best thing would probably be to run into that raccoon brother of yours or the two you met yesterday—I think they're the guys who are staying at my inn. They've probably at least got more info than we do right now."

"I suppose you're right..."

"You think so...?"

...

Their conversation ceased for a short time. It had been so sudden, Orphen hadn't even understood what had happened for a moment, but under the drifting fairy lights, he finally realized. A third voice had cut in.

"Who's there?!" He spun around, trying to determine the identity of the speaker—he was fairly certain the voice had come from behind him.

And there, he found...

"?!"

...A man hanging upside down from a tree branch. He was staring straight at them.

Orphen recognized the man. He'd seen him the day before, at the inn. He was the man who'd fallen down the stairs, with the enormous backpack. He thought he could remember someone saying they were ruin investigators or something.

Orphen had been assuming that the men Dortin had run into in the forest were this investigator and the other one, his boss, so the fact that he was here

right now wasn't all that mysterious.

But...the fact that he was hanging upside down from a tree branch, a gloomy shadow over his face, his cloudy eyes fixed on them...

Several possibilities ran through Orphen's mind. A ghost. A spirit. A specter. An apparition. Or maybe just a man who really likes being hung upside down, or is really good at being hung upside down.

Feeling like the last two might be the scariest options of the bunch, Orphen decided not to focus on those possibilities and instead just called out to the man. "Hey." He crossed his arms and asked him straight: "Answer this survey for me, would you? Question One: Are you a ghost?"

"That's pretty direct," Dortin groaned, sounding tired.

Orphen ignored him and the upside-down man shook his head sadly.

"I'm not deaaaaad...or so I'd like to think..." He sobbed, and his tears fell not down his cheeks, but down his brow and temples to the top of his head.

Orphen turned back to Dortin. "What do you think, Lie-Detector Dortin?"

"Uh, I'd rather you didn't force a role like that onto me without even asking..."

"Well, how about Go-Touch-Him-And-See-If-There's-Any-Danger Dortin?"

"Not much better..."

"Tch. Not a team player, are you?" Orphen clucked his tongue and turned back to the man again.

Aside from the fact that he was hanging upside down, everything about the man's looks was rather plain, and not a single thing about him suggested danger in any way. But not everything in the world follows the same rules as mushrooms when it comes to danger.

He pondered such things as he spoke. "Well, ghosts might be a little out of left field, but hanging upside down...hmm...it's not very good for your health."

"Is that the problem?"

Orphen ignored Dortin's comment once again, inching closer to the man. Only

about a half a step. Once he was certain there was no response from the man—whether it was getting surprised, leaping toward him, or spewing acid—he took another small step forward.

“Let me just ask to make sure... Yesterday, around noon, were you in the same inn as me?”

“Huh? The Branch of the Forest? If so, then yes.”

“Hmm... I thought so.”

“...”

Freezing for a moment, Orphen eventually pointed at the man and told Dartin, “See? It’s just like I said. They’re fine, right?”

“What part about this is ‘fine’?!” Dartin screamed, not accepting Orphen’s words.

But in any case, this might just have been the first time since coming to this hot spring town that things were going in a way Orphen expected.



“Claiomh, you’ll catch a cold.”

Claiomh turned around when she heard the voice behind her. Her head swayed as she did. She found Majic poking his head out of the inn entrance.

He had a point. It was still fall, but she’d been sitting out on the steps by the door since the sun set, so she definitely could catch a cold. It didn’t help that the high altitude made the air even more chilly.

She held Leki, who she’d put on her lap to act as a blanket, to her chest and faced forward again, watching as the colors of night painted over the hot spring town.

She heard Majic sigh, though he did appear to be trying to cover it up at least.

“Sure, I’m worried ’cause Master’s not coming back too, but it’s Master, so I’m sure he’s fine. It’s not like this has never happened before.”

“...I’m not worried.” She said the words without really thinking about them, but then realized that it probably sounded like she was putting on a brave front.

That soured her mood, so she closed her mouth. If she corrected herself, she'd just make it worse.

That wasn't it. Sure, she was here to wait for Orphen, but she'd also just wanted to be alone.

"Hm... Want me to bring you a blanket, then? Or Master's jacket, if you want to wear something."

"Okay." She nodded and heard the door close behind her.

...I'm not worried about him, Claiomh repeated to herself.

She was just...worried.

"From now on." She was sure Orphen had said that.

I never did get what he meant, but...I guess it's not all that rare for Orphen to say stuff I don't understand.

It had made her happy, but at the same time, she felt something else in the same place in her chest. And she didn't like it.

As the feelings bubbled up within her and disappeared, she just stared out at the darkness, no, at the night, without thinking about them.

Her lips opened slightly without her thinking about it. Humming a song she didn't remember when she'd learned, Claiomh softly stroked Leki's back as he nodded off on her lap. As she followed the gentle curve of his back, she was completely absorbed in his beautiful fur. Claiomh smiled at the animal, who breathed so softly that you wouldn't notice the movement unless you were looking closely.

The door opened. She didn't turn around, assuming it was Majic. She didn't stop humming either, but...

"...That's a nice song." It wasn't Majic's voice that she heard.

Claiomh turned toward the voice in surprise and found Eris emerging from the door with a blanket. She blinked and asked, "Eris?"

"I wanted to ask you something, so I told your friend I'd bring you this. Is that okay?"

“Huh...? Sure...” Claiomh nodded, accepting the blanket from her.

Eris came and sat down noiselessly beside her. Leki raised his head and yawned, awakened by Claiomh’s movement.

Staring down at him, Eris said, “He’s cute.”

“...Yeah.” Not knowing what else to say, Claiomh just agreed.

No matter how Claiomh looked at her, Eris’s expressions never changed much. Claiomh looked back at the same spot she’d been watching before, and Eris spoke to her in her usual quiet voice.

“What I wanted to ask was...”

“Yeah?”

“Is it fun?” The question was incredibly vague, but she asked it like it was completely clear what she meant.

Claiomh wasn’t sure how to answer, but... “I guess so,” she told Eris as she ignored Leki climbing up her to get onto her head. “It was a little disappointing that there weren’t any hot springs, but it’s not like we can’t even take baths. It’s just like staying at a normal inn. Plus, I had fun making beds and doing home-y stuff for the first time in a—”

“That’s not what I meant.” Eris cut her off, lifting a thin arm. Her mouth was twisted into a pained smile. It didn’t seem to be directed at Claiomh or anything, though. “Not here, I mean, you came here from really far away, right? I was wondering if that sort of thing was fun.”

“Hmm...” Now *that* was a difficult question to answer. Nothing came to mind, and she could feel her face moving on its own to respond. “I don’t really know if it’s fun... I’ve been traveling with those two for months now, so I’ve just gotten used to it. A lot of it was fun in the beginning...and I probably don’t think it’s boring or anything right now because it’s still fun.”

She didn’t quite understand what she was saying herself, and feeling like she had to change the subject for some reason, she turned the question around on Eris. “Is it not fun for you, Eris?”

“I think...it’s the opposite for me.” This time the pain in her smile was obvious

as she shook her head. “I think because I’ve never found it fun that it’s boring for me.”



“Even when you hang out with friends and stuff?”

“Friends...” She repeated the word like it was an unfamiliar concept to her. She looked off into the distance with a complicated expression on her face—like she’d licked something she knew would be bitter and discovered that it was just as bitter as she thought it’d be. “I don’t really get ‘friends’...”

“You don’t have any?”

“I don’t know... I think I had friends I was close to once...but before I knew it, I was all alone. And I can remember stuff that we used to talk about, but I can’t remember their faces.”

Claiomh just tilted her head, unable to understand what Eris was saying. Leki flailed comically as he started to slide off of her head.

“...Is it like amnesia?”

“Maybe... It feels like before I knew it, I was living here with Mama. And I feel like I want to leave, but for some reason, I also feel like I have to stay...”

“...” Claiomh couldn’t find any words to say to her, so she just listened as Eris spoke. The words came freely from Eris, as if she were either used to telling this to people, or maybe like she’d practiced doing so in her head countless times before. She spoke without pause, never mistaking a word.

“A lot of times, I’ll think something, but I won’t understand why I’m thinking it. Like knowing a song I can’t ever remember hearing. Then there’s...Lotz.”

“What about them?”

“...They make me sick just seeing them. There are plenty of other things I don’t like, but with them, it’s different, and I don’t know why. I hate them...and I’m scared of them. So, so much.”

“Well, they’re a gang, right? I don’t see the problem with hating them and being scared of them,” Claiomh said, sliding closer to the girl sitting next to her. Their shoulders were only touching slightly, but they could still feel each other’s warmth from this distance. “You don’t have to worry about them. I’m not scared of them. Orphen’s way more of a gangster than they are.”

“...Is he?” The words didn’t seem to comfort Eris, whose eyes were still filled

with doubt.

“Oh, what I mean is, you don’t need to worry,” Claiomh hurriedly corrected herself. “My dad always said worry is just something that becomes a funny story later. So...if you think that, it’s not as scary.”

“The future...” Eris repeated the words dazedly. She cast her eyes down and murmured, “Is there really a future?”

“I don’t think there’s any reason to be *that* defeatist about things...” Claiomh slapped a hand to her chest to show her confidence. She stood up and raised her voice a bit. “A-ny-way! I dunno about the rest of your life, but you don’t have to worry about Lotz anymore. I can guarantee you that. I’ll make this inn the safest place in the world, or my name isn’t Pretty Clee, Here to Save the Day! I’m working on my killer move right now, the Plasma Dynamic Gigaburn.”

“Doesn’t sound very ‘pretty’...”

While they were talking, they suddenly heard something from far away.

“...?” They went quiet and exchanged a look. They couldn’t see anything on the road, but it was footsteps they’d heard. Slow, dragging footsteps, like someone was carrying something heavy.

“What’s that?” Eris asked nervously, clutching the hem of her skirt.

Claiomh frowned and took a look around. She wasn’t sure, but...she didn’t think they were just hearing things. She was pretty certain they were footsteps. And along with the irregular footsteps, they could hear heavy breathing, too.

Claiomh looked down at Eris and the other girl returned her gaze, frightened.

“It’ll be alright. Leave it to me,” Claiomh told her. She did her best to stand at the ready. It was a few moments later when she realized she didn’t know what was coming or if it was even headed in their direction.

But before she could worry about that, a man slowly turned a corner.

Even under the moonlight, she could tell. It was one of the two men from the Lotz Group that she’d seen earlier in the day. This was the one with the seedy-looking face, in the mountain-climbing outfit. He was approaching slowly—plodding along, really—with a heavy-looking bucket.

It took him a full minute to get twenty meters from the corner. He panted as he carried the large bucket, an ugly smirk on his face.

When he'd made it to the entrance, Claiomh stepped out in front of him and asked him bluntly, "Didn't I say to never come back?"

"A kid shouldn't grandstand like that," the man said, lifting the bucket up.

Claiomh hesitated for a moment. She wasn't sure if she should jump on him or not. The bucket was filled to the brim with something that looked like water. The man seemed exhausted, and was moving sluggishly. She probably didn't have to jump on him. She could get away from him if she ran. However...

With a shudder, she remembered that Eris was still sitting beside her. And she couldn't run away.

What was in the bucket? She recalled something about this, too. Arson. What if it was oil or something similar? Of course, Claiomh wasn't having such a logical train of thought. The actual words that came to mind were...

We can't get away!

If it was something dangerous, Leki should protect them. Believing that, Claiomh stood at the ready. Though maybe it was more accurate to say she was flinching. It wasn't like there was a proper way to defend yourself against something splashed at you from a bucket anyway.

Leki, please! Calling out to the creature always atop her head, Claiomh waited for the next moment. It would all be over in a second...

Splash!

The man swung the bucket down and Claiomh felt an impact like she'd been struck. A large amount of water had hit her face-first. It was over in a second.

The liquid burst like a flower blooming, spreading out in a circle. When the impact passed, all that remained was a puddle forming around her feet and the sound of dripping liquid.

Soaking wet from head to toe, Claiomh whispered, "...It's just water...?"

Leki was just lounging on her head.

She recalled Orphen once saying that since deep dragons grew to be several meters long, they became able to live underwater. Water wasn't a threat to Leki, so he didn't register it as such.

She looked down and found Eris also sopping wet.

Claiomh glared at the man who'd tossed the water.

He smirked and nodded. "Yep, it's just water."

"...What's the point of that?" It was doubtful that she needed to ask him, but she still felt she should.

The man kept smirking. "It's just harassment."

"...I see..." Claiomh whispered quietly, ever so quietly, and the man spun around on his heel and dashed off at full speed.

"Well, that's that! See ya!"

"Ah! Hey, wait a second! I'm not just gonna let you go!"

Clutching Leki to her chest, she kicked aside the waterlogged skirt clinging to her legs and took off after the man, also at full speed.

"Achoo!"

It was about thirty minutes later when Claiomh returned to the inn, sneezing quietly.

"Geez... That stupid punk ran all over the place and hid... I'm in a skirt here, it's hard for me to run! And if I run around while soaking wet, I'll catch a cold for sure. I can't believe I just let him get away. Geez... Achoo!"

There was still water all over the ground at the entrance of the inn. She wasn't worried about getting her shoes wet or anything at this point, but she avoided the puddle as she approached the door anyway.

Eris must have gone back inside by now. Claiomh grasped the doorknob, thinking she'd ask the girl to draw her a bath.

That was when she noticed something strange.

She sensed something and looked to the side. One of the great windows of

the hall was there, the glass completely smashed.

“Huh?!” Claiomh let out a meaningless exclamation and went over to the window. It appeared to have been broken from the outside. Shards of glass littered the inside of the building. They sparkled in the light of the gas lamps, looking rather beautiful, but she had no time to admire the sight. There was someone lying collapsed in the hall.

“Majic!” Claiomh shouted, trying to avoid the broken glass as she entered the hall. She was relieved to find that Majic wasn’t lying on top of the glass as she ran over to him. “What happened?!”

He didn’t appear to be knocked out or anything, he was just lying there. Weakly raising his head, Majic mumbled, “Well...the window suddenly broke, and a weird guy came in... He hit me, and there was nothing I could do to stop him.”

“Where’s Eris? And Sheena?” Claiomh looked around hurriedly. She didn’t see any sign of them. She could sense somehow that she and Majic were the only people in the inn.

“I dunno.” Majic shook his head, looking rather confused. He must have been hit pretty hard, because his eyes were still spinning. He suddenly grimaced as if moving his head had caused him to recall the pain he was feeling.

“I was right here...then Eris said someone threw water on the two of you at the entrance, then the window broke...”

“What happened?”

“A guy in a dark suit came in... When I stepped in front of Eris, he hit me, and then I don’t really know what happened...” His face fell, though it didn’t seem to be because of the pain he was in. “...I’m sorry, Claiomh.”

“Geez... If you’re just gonna get hit, then run away instead!” Claiomh said irritably as she looked over Majic’s head and face.

His left cheek was already starting to swell, but she couldn’t see any other obvious wounds on him. Only a doctor could tell her more.

“Now I’m pissed.” Claiomh clenched a fist and growled, “Those guys really are

a gang. If it's come to this, I really will have to lift the seal on my killer move, the Plasma Dynamic Gigaburn."

"...What's that?" Majic asked as he gingerly touched the swelling on his face.

Just then, they were interrupted.

"That won't do."

Claiomh went ramrod straight at the solemn voice. In an instant, she whirled around and took a fighting stance. She thought that gang had come back, but...that wasn't the case.

"I can't approve of a young woman such as yourself having such a killer move. You agree with me, don't you, Researcher Nosa—Oh, he's not here, is he?"

The person speaking as if nothing about this situation was abnormal was an overweight man hanging upside down from the ceiling.

Claiomh definitely recognized him. He was the "chief researcher" who was staying at the inn the day before as a guest. He definitely hadn't been hanging upside down from the ceiling then, though.

Just under his head was the three-dimensional map installed in the hall.

The chief researcher nodded to himself, mumbled something, and...just like that, he was gone.

Chapter XII: An Old Man with No Story to Tell

The building sat alone and inconspicuous in the forest. Its walls were a muddy green that blended in with the moss and mold growing here and there. Just looking at it gave you a sense of its immense age.

All they could really see under the night sky was a hazy silhouette, but they could make out the general outline of the building. The walls were gradually illuminated by the pure white light of sorcery. The swaying fairy lights spilled over the surface of the walls like water.

Looking up at the camouflaged building, Orphen muttered to no one in particular, “Is this it?”

“Ugh...yeah.” The tearful reply had obviously (was it obvious?) come from that researcher. His name was Nosapp, Orphen thought he recalled. He was still hanging upside down from a tree branch.

...*No*. Orphen said to no one but himself. That wasn’t quite right.

Nosapp had followed them this far by leaping between tree branches. As if his feet were naturally drawn to them.

No, that wasn’t quite accurate, either. He wasn’t clinging to the tree branches. Each time he moved, the branches swayed. Upward. And they bent under his weight. Upward. He was entrusting his weight to the branches so that he didn’t fall, but—not to be too repetitive—it was high up in the sky that he was in danger of falling toward.

In other words, it wasn’t that he was hanging from the tree branches, but that he was standing upside down on the underside of the branches.

Gravity is reversed...? That was all Orphen could think. He didn’t know what it meant, though. Lost in thought, Orphen looked back toward the building.

At a glance, it almost looked like an inverted square pyramid with its head buried in the ground. It was pretty large, but because it was green and the branches of the trees extended up around it, it would have been hard to spot

from above. Orphen realized that was why he hadn't noticed it from up on the cliff. The building had no windows or anything that looked like a door inside.

...No. He repeated to himself. He had realized it earlier. There was a small opening near the base of the upside-down pyramid that a person could probably fit through. It was like the entire building had simply been turned upside down.

"I'm guessing...?" Orphen pointed up at the hole as he spoke to Nosapp.

The researcher nodded. "Yeah, I came from there. From there, down the trees..."

"Thought so."

"We can't... climb up there, can we?" Dortin murmured.

There were plenty of ways to do so, but Orphen frowned and looked around. He looked at both of their faces and shrugged his shoulders. "I could make it up there on my own somehow. What about you two?"

"I'll wait here. I leave my brother in your hands."

"I don't really want to go back up there..."

Dortin and Nosapp both answered him swiftly.

Sighing, Orphen waved his hand at them. "Yeah, that's about what I was expecting. Well, whatever. I don't mind not having anything holding me back."

As he grumbled, he began to form a sorcerous composition. His plan was to jump up to the entrance at the top of the inverted pyramid, but...

"?!" The moment he did, he felt an impact and looked down in surprise. "Wh-What? Why'd you suddenly grab my arm?"

Dortin had latched onto him with a stiff expression when he'd lowered his arms in preparation to jump.

"Waaaaaaaaaah!" Just then, Nosapp, standing on the tree branch (was it okay to just describe him that way?) let out a scream.

Orphen looked over and found the panicked researcher leaping down to a higher branch. He seemed to be heading for the entrance of the building via the

tree branches.

“...What?” Orphen muttered, uncomprehending.

He didn't receive an answer to his question. Instead, Dortin just vaguely pointed behind him, trembling.

Orphen slowly followed the line Dortin's trembling finger was tracing, all the while feeling like something bitter was stuck in his throat, or like something heavy was pressing on his temple, or like something sharp had been thrust into his ear. In any case, feeling something rather unpleasant.

He moved his gaze in that direction without fully turning around. The light of his sorcery didn't illuminate a very large area, but still, he could vaguely make out his surroundings.

And in some trees...no, in all the trees around them, were the faces of beasts, hiding behind the trunks and branches and ample foliage. The beasts staring fixedly at them were unquestionably of the same sort as the monkey they'd encountered earlier. They were all the same: beasts that resembled monkeys, with strangely overdeveloped fingers, and brains protruding from their skulls encased in tanks also protruding from their heads.

They'd appeared without sound or presence, likely because of the sorcerous “permeation” ability they possessed.

Orphen didn't even shudder. He just quietly came to a decision. “...Well.” He asked Dortin without moving an inch. “You wanna wait here?”

“No thank you.” Dortin's answer was immediate. He grasped Orphen's jacket and squeezed.

Orphen looked up. He couldn't see Nosapp anymore. He'd likely already entered the building.

Orphen took a quiet breath. He reformed the composition that had been interrupted earlier.

Countless eyes of countless beasts watched him. Countless pairs, eyes, eyes, eyes. The gazes crossed in all too simple a pattern, and at the center of their focus, Orphen shouted.

“I dash across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!”

The moment he leapt up, the weight left his body. He jumped up, holding Dörtin, to the building the same color as the forest, and just then, remembered something.



The building stood in plain sight in the center of the hot spring town. It was probably old, but had been remodeled to look brand new on the outside.

To say that the hazy sight of it under the moonlight looked creepy might not be the fairest assessment. But Majic was looking up at it feeling rather glum.

The hot spring town at night. Naturally, there were plenty of people nearby when he looked around. He didn't want to think about how everyone going in and out of the inn was looking his way, but he couldn't help noticing.

“...This is it!”

“Sure is.”

Claiomh stood right in front of the Lotz Hotel, fist clenched. Majic stood behind her, nodding powerlessly.

Three women who looked like housewives passed by them (at a slight distance). Majic could hear them chuckling to themselves, though Claiomh didn't seem to notice.

She'd changed out of her wet clothes and was in her usual t-shirt and jeans. Like always, Leki rode on her head. If that was all, it would be fine, but...she also had a sword, and on top of her white t-shirt, she was wearing protectors for some kind of sport, though Majic had no idea where she'd found them. On her shoulders, her chest, her stomach, her thighs, and her knees, she had rubber pads that looked like pancakes, and on her back, she'd stuck some kind of stick that was strangely bent partway down.

“Not that I really care, but what are you wearing, Claiomh?” Majic just couldn't bear to remain silent.

“Hm?” Claiomh turned around. “I don't really know. I guess they're for this game called stickball. I saw it in a pamphlet.”

“...But why?”

“To protect myself! Isn’t that obvious?” Claiomh answered simply.

That was the answer Majic was most afraid of, however. “Umm...” Backing up, Majic asked even more fearfully, “And why do you need to protect yourself?”

“Because we’re raiding the place, duh.”

“Aaaaah! I thought sooooo!” Claiomh answered him instantly and Majic wailed, clutching his head.

He spun around and tried to flee, but something grabbed him by the collar from behind. When he fearfully turned around, he found it was Claiomh.

“And what are you trying to run for?” she asked him with a surly expression.

“Uuugh... My face is starting to swell up, so I’m gonna go home early.” He sobbed a little as he said it, but Claiomh paid that no mind.

She turned around, still holding Majic’s collar, and strode off toward the Lotz Hotel. Naturally, he was pulled along behind her.

“Aaah!” he wailed. “Claiomh, Claiomh, how about we just don’t do this, I mean, it’ll be way safer to just wait at the inn until morning, and like, there’s no need to go out of our way to head into danger!”



“What are you saying?!” Claiomh shouted as she continued forward. “Eris and Sheena have disappeared! Isn’t it obvious they’ve been kidnapped?!”

“I don’t think it’s that obvious!”

“Why not?!”

“Come on, this is weird! I was only unconscious for a few seconds, how could one guy run off with two people—”

“What are you even talking about? Whatever happens is the truth!”

“Th-Then what about the guy standing on the ceiling?!”

“I don’t really know what that was about, so I’m leaving it for later!”

“I’d prefer to leave this raid for later, too—”

Majic suddenly realized that he wasn’t being dragged anymore. Claiomh had stopped. He straightened himself out and looked at her. Leki was facing him, sitting there with his head cocked.

Majic groaned, looking up at his diagonal, green eyes. “...Claiomh?”

“They’re here.” Naturally, it was Claiomh who’d spoken, not Leki.

“Huh?”

Feeling something unpleasant, Majic moved his gaze from Leki to over Claiomh’s shoulder in the direction she was looking—in other words, toward the Lotz Hotel’s entrance. He’d been dragged a fair distance, so they were right in front of it now.

The Lotz Hotel sign stood out a lot, though it stopped short of crossing the line into tastelessness. There was a vast lobby underneath it, and from that lobby, someone was emerging.

He was clearly not just a tourist, but was tall and seemed like a civil, quiet man. He wore a crisp brown suit that identified him as an employee and his hair was blond, obviously dyed. But due to his wide cheeks and jaw, he didn’t come off as a man trying too hard to look good. It suited him in an odd way.

“Excuse me, miss,” the man politely addressed Claiomh, who was standing there trying to look intimidating. “Well, we’ve received some complaints from

our guests... I don't believe those are the best things to wear when you're out and about... And even if it's a toy, I can't say I approve of you carrying around something that looks like a sword either."

"Yah." *Conk.*

It happened in an instant. There was a dull sound, and the next second, the man collapsed, blood gushing from his nose.

Claiomh turned around, still holding the sword (scabbard and all) up and at the ready. "The battle's begun, Majic. Try not to get in my way too much, okay?"

"...You could have just not brought me, you know," Majic grumbled, unsure of if he wanted to laugh or cry. Of course, he couldn't have just let her go alone, so he probably would have ended up tagging along anyway.

He looked back and found her entering the lobby of the Lotz Hotel with absolutely no hesitation. There were two or three men dressed the same as the one collapsed on the floor trying to stop her.

Majic sighed and followed after her. A moment later...

"Hey!"

He stopped with a jolt. The voice had come from behind him. He turned around and found a large man with a scary, flushed face walking toward them. He was wearing a plain shirt and pants, but had an armband on. It was dark, so Majic couldn't quite make it out, but he had a good idea of what the letters on it said. It was "Self-Defense Force."

The man strode forward and grasped hold of Majic's shoulder. "What's going on here?!" he asked, shaking Majic fiercely. "Who are you two?!"

"Err..."

Several options flashed through his brain, but...apologizing probably wouldn't do anything here. Orphen had forbidden him from using sorcery, and he had enough pride to make up his mind not to use it until he had the sort of perfect control his master had. Explaining the situation...nothing would be more stupid. Play it off by crying. Play it off by laughing. Pray to the heavens that an angel

will alight from the sky and shoot through all evil with an arrow made of stars.

In the end... Majic just sighed, giving up. *There's no reason for just me to be holding back, is there?*

For some reason, the face of the assassin from Kimluck surfaced in his mind.

Once you've made up your mind, there's only one thing to do. The one thing he could think was, "What would Master do?" You could say that the situation was exceedingly simple. There was a large, angry man grabbing his shoulder. He couldn't imagine winning against that man.

His body moved reflexively. "The legs," his instincts told him. Orphen would smash the man's knee, then put an elbow to the back of his head when he went down and curled up in pain. When he pictured the movements he'd seen countless times before, his body was already moving.

He aimed for his opponent's knee with his heel—*thwack*.

"Ow."

"..."

That was the man's only response. He looked down in surprise at his leg—Majic's foot was still touching his knee where he'd kicked him.

"...Huh?" he muttered. He looked up and found the man's expression darkening with even more anger. This was only natural, but something about it seemed unreasonable to him. While the man was frozen in anger, Majic slipped his shoulder out from the man's grip, stepped back a few paces, and waved his arms, flustered.

"Umm, I, no, I just, uhh... I'm sorry! Let me just explain the situation, and then I'll play it off by laughing and crying! Aaah, and if you could give me five minutes or so to pray to heaven..."

"You little *brat*!" The man had no interest in what Majic had to say. He lifted his fist in anger and rushed at the boy.

Majic's breath caught for a moment, but then he sucked it in. Slightly surprised himself that he was following the man's movements as he sucked his breath in, Majic watched the fist that was raining down toward him.

The fist was headed his way. If he did nothing, it would hit him. Majic moved slightly to the side to get out of its trajectory, leaving his right foot in place. In the next instant, as the man was passing him by, he tripped the man with his foot.

“Aaaaah?!” The man stumbled forward two, three steps, and right there was...

“Ack?!” The man who Claiomh had smacked down earlier was regaining consciousness and trying to stand up.

“Waaaaah?!” They both screamed as they collided and fell into a heap, eyes spinning.

“Eep.” Majic put a hand to his mouth and looked around. It had been a complete coincidence, but he was still surprised at the effect his action had had.

Just then...*bom!* There was an explosion. And Majic had no doubt as to its cause.

He looked in the direction of the hotel. Claiomh must have done something, because there was smoke rising from the lobby. Guests and employees were pouring out of it, screaming.

“...It’s more ‘eep’ over there, huh...” Majic muttered.

He left the two unconscious men there and ran against the crowd, heading into the hotel.

It was horrible inside the hotel.

Smoke was coming from destroyed walls and pillars, and employees were lying scattered across the floor. Cries and screams from those who hadn’t gotten away in time echoed through the air. The only reason the damage wasn’t worse was likely because Claiomh had intended to “break” the hotel rather than “burn it down”—if a huge fire had started, the damage would have been much worse. Of course, he had no idea whether or not Claiomh was aware of this fact.

Majic headed through the lobby as people fled through it, a look on his face

like he had no idea what had happened. It was hard to move the wrong way through the flood of people, but he made it through by going along the wall. What was fortunate was that it was easy to tell where Claiomh had gone. Down one hallway, he could hear destruction and screams.

He hurried down that hallway for now, and found Claiomh without too much trouble.

“Claiomh!” Majic called out to her as she beat what looked like a chef to the floor with that stickball pole.

Claiomh turned quickly and said, “Oh, Majic,” as if she had no idea what he was doing there.

Majic groaned. Something around his temple ached. He looked around, making sure there weren’t any employees or guards in this hallway, and said, “Uhh...I have a question, Claiomh. Do you have, like, a goal of some kind here?”

“Obviously I do,” she responded boldly, with a hand on her hip. “It’s total destruction.”

“Aaaaah...” He held his head again. He had basically been expecting this answer.

I’ve got to do something... A vague sense of responsibility was eating at him. Majic clapped his hands together, suddenly remembering something. “Oh! That’s right! Uhh, Claiomh. You’re not forgetting something important, are you? Err, our real goal here isn’t raiding the place, right? Wasn’t it, you know, rescuing Eris and her mother?”

“...Come to think of it, you might be right,” Claiomh muttered, looking up uncertainly—apparently she really had forgotten.

Majic leapt on her words and continued, “That’s right! If you take the whole building down before we find them, everyone’ll die! Umm, I don’t think they’d put kidnapped people in a guest room, so they’re probably locked in some kind of staff room...and this seems to be just the sort of place that would have stuff like that. Let’s just start opening doors and looking for them!”

“You’re right!” Claiomh agreed, clenching her first, the stickball pole still in her hand. On her head, Leki was also curling a front paw like he was making a

fist. “Okay, if you open a door and find someone you know, it’s ten points. Hold on, I’ll make a scorecard. And you get a fabulous prize if you get a bingo.”

“Er...how do you just make this stuff up on the spot?” Majic muttered, but he was satisfied that he’d managed to buy some time at least.

He put his hand on the closest door, turning the knob and opening it wide, and...

“...Ten points...” Both he and Claiomh said the same thing at the same time, dumbfounded. The response that came back to them was...

“Who the heck’s ten points?!” A shout. The figure, who was tied up in a rope and wriggling, then raised his voice even more and yelled, “Not even close, I’m the hero, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, always worth a full 120 points, and if you don’t want to die of digging a hole and shouting, then you’d best help me out here!”

“I mean, I guess I don’t mind...” Majic murmured, entering the room.

Claiomh entered the room after him and he could hear her asking, mystified, “How’d you get all...balloon-ified?”

“I am not a balloon!”

But he was. At least, that’s what Majic thought.

Volkan was floating in the center of the room, a rope tied around him. If he was just hanging from the ceiling like normal, there would be nothing strange about this, but the rope tied around Volkan was only secured to a simple desk underneath him. In other words...he was exactly like a balloon.

It looked like Volkan was defying gravity, floating about two meters in the air and only tied down by the rope. The ceilings of the Lotz Hotel were high. Three meters or so. That meant there was ample space between him and the ceiling.

The room was pretty messy. There were bunk beds and scattered things all around. But nothing looked too worn-out. It looked like a relatively new employees’ room.

While Majic was looking around, Claiomh strode carelessly into the room. She drew her sword from its sheath and slashed the silver blade from left to right.

The rope tying Volkan in place snapped apart.

“Dwaaaaah?!”

Thud. Volkan fell...to the ceiling. The rope still tied around him, he landed feet-first and yelled, “Hey, hey, hey! You’re only allowed to act so rashly up until age six, you hear me?! And if you wanna know why it’s only until age six, it’s because from age seven, they’ll start laughing at you if you ask if a banana counts as a snack!”

“I’m not sure I follow your logic...” Claiomh muttered, dubiously staring up at Volkan on the ceiling. From the looks of it, she was more interested in what would happen when she cut the rope than in helping Volkan.

Majic entered the room as well and asked, “So...why are you upside-down?”

“What?!” Volkan looked like he’d been asked something completely unexpected. After floundering for a moment, he said, with a completely straight face, “It’s not *you guys* who’re upside-down? I thought it was like a new fad, worldwide.” He stood up on the ceiling, completely self-assured.

Majic felt almost like he was falling to the side as he said, “I think...it’s just you who’s upside-down...”

“And what are you doing here anyway? Didn’t you get thrown off a cliff?”

“Ah! That’s right! Your little brother said you died!” Majic pointed out when he remembered.

Volkan didn’t seem particularly bothered by that, however. Still tied up like a caterpillar, he nevertheless bent back dexterously and laughed, “Haaa ha ha! You think this immortal beast, who’s placed second in a contest of sturdiness, would go down that easily?! Why would he think I was dead, though? What a mystery...”

“I mean, don’t ask me...”

“And you only placed second, huh?” Claiomh piped up.

Volkan ignored her. “Heh heh. Well, why don’t I just tell you bumbling children the heroic tale of exactly what it is I’m doing here if you’re so curious?”

“...We’re not that curious.”

“...Well, I was kind of hoping that if I told you, you might help me out here...”

“Well, alright...”

“It began in a green room!” *Whp*. He probably wanted to stick his arm out, but since he still had the rope around him, he ended up just sticking one finger out slightly.

Volkan raised his voice and continued, “I awoke! I then walked down a hall and found this weird model and picked up this diary that said I should do this and that and so I did and then before I knew it I was in this building! And when I just happened to enter this room, there was a pair of complete idiots who I showed the diary to as well, and they did this to me. Oh, what will happen to our hero, the Great Vulcano Volkan next? To be continued.”

“...”

“...Did you understand any of that?” Claiomh asked.

Majic wordlessly shook his head.

Volkan didn't seem too pleased by their reaction. He frowned grumpily. “Hrm. Well, children will be children. You've got the comprehension of an invertebrate. Those other two idiots didn't seem to glean a single thing from that explanation either.”

After a moment or two of groaning, the dwarf began again, “In other words, to put it into an anagram so that even you foolish babies can understand...”

“...I think if you make it an anagram, it'll be even harder for us to understand...”

“Ah!” Claiomh suddenly exclaimed.

Majic was surprised by the sudden noise, but he still caught the sound of something falling to the floor in the next moment. It seemed to have slipped out of Volkan's pocket. It was a book.

Or maybe a notebook rather than a book. It looked like a thin, grey journal. Claiomh swiftly picked it up and opened it. Majic leaned over and peered at it as well.

“Aaah!” Volkan shouted belatedly. “Hrm... Are you two not aware that

normally, picking up something a hero dropped so casually and staring at it would be a crime deserving of a death by being buried in round cushions—”

“Will you shut up?!” Claiomh shouted, likely realizing that this book would be a much bigger clue than anything the dwarf could say (and Majic agreed with this).

Ignoring Volkan’s quiet sulking, Majic stared hard at the notebook. It was clear to him right away why Volkan had called it a “diary”—each page had a small line that listed a date on it.

It was an old journal. The pages had changed color and the ink on them had faded. But it wasn’t unreadable. None of the pages were missing and it looked like it had been taken care of very well.

The first line of the first page was a title. It was not succinct by any means, but it was the only title the book had.

“...Musings on Ways to Kill an Immortal Species from a Celestial Execution Site.” Majic quietly read it aloud. Beneath the title was a signature. “Fien Shosky Lotz.”

Creak...

“Who’s there?!” Claiomh spun around like she was spring-loaded.

Majic followed suit and stood at the ready for whatever was at the door, where the floor had creaked. It hadn’t been a loud sound, but everyone had noticed it among the quiet.

They had left the door open. Maybe that was careless of them, but they hadn’t really been trying to hide themselves in the first place, Majic recalled with some disgust. They’d made such a commotion that there might not have been any point in hiding, but they didn’t need to just leave the door open like that.

In the shadow of the door stood a figure. That figure had definitely been the source of the noise.

“Fien Shosky Lotz...” Repeating the name as if it was poisonous to them, the figure stepped out from behind the door. “I didn’t think I’d hear that name from

some children I've never seen before..."

It was an old man. An old man who looked like he'd frowned for so many long years that the expression had gotten carved into this face. An unlit cigar in his hand, he looked over at Majic and Claiomh from under raised eyebrows. "...You the kids who're raiding my inn?"

"That's right!" Claiomh stepped forward fearlessly. "We're here to take back Eris and Sheena! Just so you know, I'm absolutely certain that the gangsters from this inn are the ones who kidnapped them!"

"Ah, err...uhh, that's right," Majic tried to back Claiomh up, but she glared at him, so he went silent. A moment later, he piped up instead, "Err, neither of us wants the police called on us, I'm sure, so if we could solve this peacefully... Otherwise, I'm pretty sure Claiomh will really raze this whole place."

"I see," said the old man plainly, without so much as a change in expression.

"You see...?" Majic had no idea what to say to that, so he just repeated the man's words.

The old man went on indifferently, not to Claiomh or Majic, and definitely not to Volkan, who was sitting on the ceiling, but as if he was talking to himself.

"Sheena, eh...? Is she still keeping that up...?"

"Huh?" Claiomh asked. Her shoulders fell when her anger was so simply brushed aside. The old man hadn't even reacted to her.

He smoked the silence like a cigar for a few seconds, then turned to Majic. "You two."

"Y...Yes?" Majic responded, cowed. The old man hadn't even done anything. He hadn't even raised his eyebrows. Still, Majic was intimidated by the man for basically no reason.

He went on, "I don't intend to do anything to you, even if I have nothing to fear from the police. But I want that journal back. It belonged to my son."

He raised his hand to his chest slowly and crushed the cigar in it. "My son, who died twenty years ago."



It was a vast room, but most of the space was taken up by tanks, leaving only an area a few meters wide and long where people could fit, in addition to the narrow passageways between the tanks. That small space was currently completely occupied by two women collapsed on the floor, a three-dimensional model of a map of the area that almost seemed to be looking down on them, and a man in a dark suit with his back turned to them, gazing at the tanks.

“...Heheh...” The man let out a meaningless sound, as if he had no words to say.

The tanks were all full of a light green liquid. There was nothing meaningless one could say in front of the lines of dozens, hundreds of tanks. The liquid inside them glowed, casting the area in a green light.

Fwoom. A small light lit above the map model. It grew in size swiftly, teleporting above the floor and taking on a human shape. Then...it materialized.

“Bro! I finally lost that bitch! So—” The materialized figure addressed the man in the dark suit who was already here. “I did like you said, and it all happened just like you said it would!”

“...I see.” The man’s reaction was flat, but his hands were shaking slightly. “Which means the stuff in that notebook was the truth. So this’ll work, right?”

“It will, right, Bro?!”

“Yeah.”

“What’re you looking at though, Bro?”

“Are you an idiot? This is a Celestial ruin. And it’s untouched too. This is worth money. I’ve only seen the reports myself, but the amount of money that changes hands...”

“It’s a lot? It’s a lot, right?”

“Plus, this is an execution site, you know. An execution site has...y’know, stuff to execute people. And this is stuff to kill immortal dragons. They’re killer weapons, basically. You could sell this stuff to any number of people and you’d be set, not just for the rest of your life; you could make an investment into your next life, too.”

“B-B-B-Bro... I can’t stop crying...”

“Yeah... We can forget all about being chewed out by that selfish prick of a boss in that stupid hotel,” the man declared, nodding with confidence.

Until he caught sight of a silver flash right at his partner’s neck.

Chapter XIII: A Mystery with No Enigma

...

It isn't that I didn't know you.

Or that I forgot.

I was just sleepy.

I've been idle for years.

And that's fine. But...

What about... What about you?



"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

Sorcerous light converged on the monkeys flooding in through the narrow entrance—the explosion rocked the whole area. Orphen's whole body groaned with the thunderous sound and scorching heat. The heatwave pushed a few of the monkeys back, but...the majority of them broke through the heat completely unfazed, their hands glowing with light.

"Dammit—" Orphen cursed.

I didn't think that would work, but...it wasn't completely useless at least...

The attack had been effective against a couple of the beasts. It was likely their "permeation" ability hadn't activated in time.

"Wah!" Dorton shouted behind him.

It had only been seconds since they'd leapt into the doorway. Orphen had wanted to get a little farther in, but...he turned around and checked. He'd have to do something about the monkeys chasing them first.

They can't block what they can't react to... Orphen judged, starting a grand incantation.

“I trace thee—” The composition of sorcery he formed in the air expanded with his power. “—Lightblade’s Trail!”

With his shout, seven spheres of light roughly the size of fists appeared around him. Like usual, the light was the plain white light of sorcery. Each sphere emitted a high-pitched buzz as it vibrated in place.

The monkeys all froze. They raised their arms cautiously, but the runes on their hands didn’t activate because they didn’t know the nature of their opponent’s attack.

Take this...! Feeling enough pressure that he was worried his eyeballs were gonna pop out of his skull, Orphen traced a path with each of the light orbs he’d created.

Buzz! There was a sound like a cicada’s cry for a split second. The lights slid through the space on the trails he’d planned for them...not that he could see that.

The orbs moved at the speed of light in a pseudo-teleportation, each striking a monkey without giving them even the time to scream. Engulfing their prey, they swelled up, bursting into intense flames.

Orphen looked around in the heating passageway, confirming his work. He’d wiped out all of the monkeys that had followed them inside at least.

...All of them? His spine froze. That couldn’t be right. *There’s too few of them!*

Orphen turned around, screaming soundlessly. The only light in the structure came from his sorcery. But a little farther down the dark passageway, Dortin was standing, frozen.

He realized the reason for the dwarf’s state immediately—as well as the reason there were so few monkeys coming in from the entrance.

Beyond the spot where Dortin stood frozen and trembling, monkeys were slowly emerging from the walls, the floor, the ceiling, sliding through...



“Daaaaaaah!” All Orphen could think to do was yell. He scooped up Dortin from behind him and formed another composition at full power.

“I leap over thee, Towering Spire!”

Everything in front of him vanished, and when his vision returned, he was standing in a section of the hallway several meters deeper than where he was before. The monkeys hadn’t reached this spot yet.

“Dammit...” Orphen set Dortin down, looked back at the spot where the monkeys were emerging over his shoulder, and sighed. His body felt heavy with fatigue. “I’m pumping out all my biggest spells today.”

“You must be in top form,” Dortin said rather carefreely.

Orphen glared at him. “Yeah, until I run out!”

The monkeys were nearly free of the walls by this point.

“C’mon, we’re heading deeper in!” Orphen shouted, and ran for the depths of the hall as fast as he could.



It was an instant.

In only an instant, the four people appeared there.

The lights appeared above the model, floated to the ground, and manifested.

There were four lights. Three of them stopped at the floor and one of them manifested and then fell to the ceiling.

“Bogyeh!” the small figure let out a strange cry when it fell.

It was a large room with a tall ceiling.

On the floor, there was a blonde girl with a puppy on her head, holding a sword still in its sheath. A blond boy appeared slightly after the girl. And lastly, an elderly gentleman with a harsh look in his eyes holding a strangely aged notebook.

“Hyaaa!” The girl’s voice echoed through the room. Her eyes were open wide in a look of blank amazement. “What is this? How’d we get here so suddenly?”

Was it teleportation?”

“P-Probably,” the boy responded, slightly off-balance. He turned his head, looking this way and that, and asked, “Where...are we?”

The large space was packed with tight lines of tanks that had green liquid inside them. The green light in the room seemed to be coming not from the tanks themselves but from the liquid inside them. There was a constant bubbling coming from the tanks in the faintly green-dyed space.

“Resuscitation devices.”

“...Huh?” the boy asked.

The one who’d spoken was the old man. He was gazing at the notebook and ignoring the cold sweat on his forehead with a ferocity that said he might just be able to will it away.

“They’re resuscitation devices.” He repeated.

“Aaah!” This time, the girl shouted. She pointed to an area a slight distance away and added, “Eris!”

There was a woman lying on the floor where she was pointing. She was young, with black hair tied back and a frail look to her.

The black dog leapt down from the girl’s head. The girl strode over to the woman, accompanied by the dog.

“There’s no one else here...” the boy muttered, taking a careful look around.

The girl didn’t seem particularly bothered by that as she crouched down next to the woman. “Good. She’s alive.”

“Of course she is.” The emotionless words had come from the old man.

The girl spun around, her soft hair fluttering behind her after the swift movement. “But...”

Where she pointed, on the floor, was a vivid, red stain of blood about the size of a fist.



Orphen shouted as he strode down the green stone hall. “Dorttiin!”

“Yes?!” Dorton responded, running just as quickly beside him.

“There’s something I realized!”

“What’s that?!”

Running and talking at the same time was proving very difficult, but Orphen still had to get the words out. He pointed ahead of him and went on, “We’ve been running down a one-way path this whole time!”

“Yeah, we have!”

“And yet!”

“Yes?!”

“We haven’t caught up to Nosapp, who ran in here before us! Why?!”

“Maybe he’s just a really fast runner!”

“He didn’t really look it!”

“Then maybe they caught him already?!”

Orphen stopped at that, his heel scraping against the floor.

Dorton kept running a few meters before stopping himself in surprise. “Wh-What is it?!”

Orphen shook his head. “What if he hasn’t been caught?”

“...Huh?” Dorton asked, confused. “Wh-What’s your basis for that?”

“Wishful thinking! What reason could there be if he hasn’t been caught?!” Orphen asked desperately, looking back the way they’d come. The monkeys were coming after them slowly, as if they couldn’t run very fast in the stone halls. They probably had half a minute. Of course, then they could just start running again, but Orphen was at the end of his stamina, body throbbing in want of oxygen.

If he got captured, then isn’t it also weird that we haven’t seen him? Since he was nowhere to be found, the only thing Orphen could think was that there was a secret passage or something hidden nearby. Is there anything like that...? He looked around the hall.

The passageway was extremely simple, just a hall three meters in height and width. They were surrounded by strange stone walls with no sorts of seams that he could see. The walls gave off a faint green light, but since that wasn't quite enough to see by, there were also glyphs every ten meters or so on the ceiling giving off white light.

He couldn't picture a secret passageway or hidden door existing in this hall. And even if one did exist, he didn't have the time to search for it.

What's the difference between him and us... Their birthplaces? Their ages? Such things went through his mind before he raised his head in comprehension.

At the same time, Dortin shouted, "Aaaaah! Look there!"

Orphen turned around and found a monkey only a few steps away from them. He ignored it and grabbed Dortin. Holding the dwarf under his arm, he looked up at the ceiling.

"So that's it!" he shouted, deploying his composition at the glyphs shining on the ceiling.

"I bound across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!" Holding Dortin, he leapt into the Wyrd Glyph...

"Daaaaah!"

Orphen tumbled to the stone floor, hitting his shoulder hard but somehow managing to get himself back up.

The first thing he saw was a green floor. The same green floor as the last place he'd been. He'd leapt into the Wyrd Glyph on the ceiling on a guess, but apparently he'd been wrong—clucking his tongue, he began to form an attack spell, recalling the monkeys pursuing him.

He sat up, shoving aside Dortin, and lifted his right hand to release his spell, then stopped.

"...Huh?"

He was somewhere different than the hallway he'd been in before. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were a similar green, but they were inside a room. A

room with nothing in it, that was basically the definition of the word boring.

It was shaped strangely. There was an exit—or rather, about a meter up from the floor, there was a hall that extended out from the room.

On the ceiling, there was a pointless protrusion that just looked like a rectangle sticking out. He had no idea what such a thing would be used for. It looked just about the length of a human being stretched out straight. The size of a coffin, in other words.

“Hm...” Orphen looked around. “Well, it seems we got away, at least.”

Still lying on the floor face-down, Dortin asked, “What does this mean?”

“Well, basically...” Orphen stood and looked around vaguely. He shrugged. “It’s upside-down. You saw Nosapp, right? Gravity’s reversed. This place is built to interact with it with gravity reversed. I thought the glyphs in that hallway were for lighting, but they were transference glyphs. If you’re walking on the ceiling, you’ll naturally be transferred through them. This thing, too...” He pointed at the rectangular protrusion in the ceiling. “It’s probably supposed to be a bed or something. The reason the exit’s up on the ceiling is because it’s easier to use if you’re up there walking on it. Of course... it’s not like I know the actual reason gravity’s reversed in the first place.”

“What...is this place?”

“That pamphlet said something about a Celestial execution site... Who knows how legitimate that information is, though.”

“And what were those monkeys back there anyway?”

“Well, since they attacked us, I’d guess they’re the security for this place.”

Orphen cut through the room toward the exit and stretched up to peer into it. “I just kinda jumped in here without thinking, though... Can you get outside from here...?”

“Just charging in blind, huh?”

“Oh, shut up. Like you had a better idea,” Orphen snapped. It wasn’t like he *wanted* to be flying blind like this. “Ever since coming to this hot spring town, it’s been one incomprehensible thing after another. I have no clue what’s going

on! Can't somebody just pop out and explain everything one by one from the top?"

"That'd be a little convenient, wouldn't it?" Dorton pointed out, all too calm. He was right, of course.

Orphen looked up with a sigh.

It was just then.

"In that case!" A voice came from somewhere. "You could use my help!"

Orphen blinked his eyes rapidly as he scanned the room. Dorton was looking rather puzzled too. Neither of them could see a source for the voice, but they quickly realized it was coming from the exit of the room. Their gazes naturally settled on it.

After a moment, a hand with a fat finger pointing downward in the sign of an execution appeared. As they watched it dumbly, the owner of the voice cleared his throat.

"I've often wondered..." He began in a tone like he was making smalltalk, with an opener that could only be opening for smalltalk. "...why students never ask any questions. This is a phenomenon that I find very difficult to understand. Are they not students because they wish to learn? Yet they make no effort to display their ignorance. A quandary, indeed. Are there bicycles you cannot ride? Is there bread you cannot eat? Even if there were, they'd just say nonsensical things like, 'Well, it's the teacher's fault. The lessons aren't interesting'!"

While Orphen stood there unable to do anything but remain silent, the finger slowly entered the room, followed by a wrist, an arm, an elbow. When the man's whole body emerged, Orphen realized he wasn't making a sign of execution. The thumb was supposed to be pointed up. It was just that the man's whole body was upside-down.

Eventually, an overweight middle-aged man appeared, walking on the ceiling. The man had his eyes closed and looked rather aloof as he continued, "There's a saying that goes, 'there's no need to be ashamed of not knowing something. What is shameful is not being ashamed of your ignorance.' You asked a question, and you should be proud of that. By the way, would you like to

participate in my research seminar next semester? Some call it volunteer work, but you mustn't forget that learning is a reward in itself."

"...Uhh, hold on a second, who are you?" Orphen asked, forcing his brain to keep up its work even if it was taken by surprise. The man was familiar to him—he'd probably seen him the day before, in the inn, with Nosapp.

The man nodded carefreely, not paying any mind to the fact that to him, Orphen and Dortin were upside down. "My name is Conrad. I'm Chief Researcher of the Ledgeborne Branch of the Northern Section of the Union of Lords' Ruin Investigation Research Council. And you?"

"Uhh...err...Orphen. I'm, uh...a sorcerer, I guess." Orphen faltered, thrown off by the man.

Dortin pulled his sleeve from behind and told him, "Ah, it's him. The one who was split in two in the forest yesterday."

Conrad completely ignored Dortin. He leaned forward, eyes lighting up. "A sorcerer!" He sounded overjoyed, but Orphen backed up a bit, sensing that he should keep the man at arm's length. Conrad didn't seem to notice that. Or maybe he was just predisposed to not understanding things that were inconvenient for him.

He leaned forward to make up for Orphen's step back and shouted excitedly, "How fantastic! It's not as if I don't know any sorcerers, but they're a terribly uncooperative bunch. It's very rare to see someone willing to head out to a site like you. I'm sure you've read Professor Logitec Onhudy's *The Light of a Student Who Reaches the Truth*."

"...Er, who's that?" Orphen asked, eyes narrowed.

Some of the light seemed to fade from Conrad's eyes. "Ah...well, that book's basically meaningless. All it's got going for it is its thickness. What about Professor Catherine Macht's *Work Hard, Young People*?"

"Never heard of it."

"Ugh... Well, you must have read Parap Nock's *Nine Times Nine is Eighty One*."

“...Seriously, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Aaaaah. How could this be?” Conrad said with obvious distress. He gave Orphen an accusatory look and asked, “You’ve at least done origami before, right?”

“The whole way you’re listing these things is kinda pissing me off...” Orphen folded his arms and said coldly, “Anyway, sorcerers have enough trouble just learning how to control magic! Most of our education is just spent on that! Still, our lessons are a lot more intense than your average higher education, so just leave me alone!”

“Hrm. I suppose you’ve got me there.” Orphen thought Conrad would protest, but he accepted Orphen’s words rather simply. He nodded, looking impressed, and then said, “Oh?” finally reacting to Dortin’s presence. His eyes opened wide. “If it isn’t one of the killer mushrooms.”

“...If that’s the way you’re going to remember me, then please just forget about me.”

“No, no, I remember.” Conrad stepped forward and looked up at Dortin—though from here, he was looking down. He sounded troubled as he said, “Actually, I’ve got a little problem. You see, your brother happened to leave with the notes of a previous researcher I found here.”

“...Huh?”

“If I had that notebook, I could spread absolutely sensational news across the entire continent. Oh, were you listening? I said ‘sensational.’ How many times do you think you’ll get to use that word in your life?”

“Uh huh...” Caught up in the man’s pace, much like Dortin, all Orphen could do was give him a numb reply and watch as he went on.

“You’ll probably find it just as sensational if you hear what it is I’ve discovered here,” Conrad said, still upside down on the ceiling.

Orphen’s neck was starting to hurt as he listened to Dortin ask a question.

“...Should I tell him that he’s using the word ‘sensational’ wrong, you think?”

Of course he *should* tell him that, but it wasn’t likely to change anything if he

did. So Orphen kept quiet.

Conrad had a happy smile on his face as he said, tone somehow boastful, “We’ve never discovered a Celestial execution site before.” He held a finger up and pointed it in a random direction. “How do you execute an immortal Celestial in the first place? This has always been a mystery to us.”

Immortal. Orphen repeated the word to himself bitterly. Of course, Celestials weren’t “immortal” in the strictest sense of the word. The fact that they’d vanished completely from the world at this point was proof of that.

The immortality of the Celestials... They were only immortal thanks to their skills with grand sorcery, which they employed to stave off death. It was because they led extremely long lives, brought natural disasters to heel with their sorcery, treated every possible illness, and fought all their enemies—that was all it meant.

But even that was subject to the place and time. If they could escape death itself with their sorcery, then if a criminal had more power than an executioner, they would never be able to be punished for their crimes. The stronger they were, the more easily they could escape judgment.

However, it was said that Celestials had an exceedingly harmonious society, including the administration of justice. With the Celestials gone from the world, this had long been a puzzle to human scholars. Orphen himself had even heard the question posed before.

What he found so bitter about it was something he had recalled a little while ago. *The Celestials...*

But Conrad went on, completely oblivious to the change in Orphen’s mood. “It’s not as if these ruins—the ones we’re in right now—hadn’t been discovered. Several research teams came here...some never came back, of course. And I experienced with my own body the very reason that they didn’t come back.”

“...?” Uncomprehending, Orphen asked the question with his eyes.

This, Conrad noticed immediately. He must have been sensitive to the questions of students. He explained himself immediately. “It’s those beasts. The

ones that look like monkeys. Did you catch on to their ability?”

“...I’m not sure. I saw them permeate solid matter or something, but it’s not a very appropriate skill for sentries to have.” Orphen voiced his thoughts, feeling a bit like he was back in class a long time ago.

“Didn’t you have a hard time fighting them, though?” Dorton piped up from beside him.

Orphen shrugged, sighing. “We would’ve had worse than a ‘hard time’ against that number of a more combat-specialized Celestial creation. You’ve seen their killer dolls before, haven’t you? The fact that we’re still alive is proof that they’re not suited for battle.”

“Indeed, indeed.” Conrad nodded, looking satisfied. His stomach swayed against gravity. “They are not sentries. There would be no meaning in sentries for this place. A race that could turn the finest warriors to dust with a mere swipe of their finger through the air has no need for sentries in the first place. Those beasts are tasked with using their ability against criminals. And that ability is...keeping the guilty confined to this place.”

“...How?”

“Well, naturally...” he indicated himself, looking awfully proud. “They disassemble their target’s body and implant Wyrd Glyphs inside of them. It’s impossible to decipher glyphs that are inside your own body—even for a Celestial. As you can see, the glyphs reverse gravity for the target. Meaning if you take one step outside of this building, you’ll merely fall for eternity. Right up into the sky. Of course, all this was theorized by my predecessor.”

“You seem awfully calm about it,” Orphen said with his eyes narrowed.

Conrad was speaking as if he was imparting some practical tips for gardening or something, when he was actually discussing something rather frightening, especially for *him*.

“...Unless I’m mistaken about something, doesn’t that mean you’ll be stuck like that for the rest of your life?”

“Of course not.” The middle-aged researcher shrugged his shoulders awfully casually. He fished through his breast pocket and then gave his fingers a spiteful

look when they didn't find what they were searching for. "My crime is a minor one. I merely intruded upon a restricted area. In two days or so, the glyphs should fade on their own. There's precedent for that—an investigator going missing for three days, then being found in the forest in pieces. Here's my theory: the investigator entered the forest and was caught by the monkeys. Unfortunately, he fell into the sky, likely dying in a matter of minutes. Then, after a little while, the glyphs stopped functioning, and the investigator fell back to the surface. This has been used several times in reports at past academic conferences to deny heliocentrism."

"...So the monkeys just carry out sentences without conducting any sort of trial?" Orphen asked dubiously.

Conrad laughed. "No, I'm sure it's just an emergency measure to capture and restrain any humans that approach the execution grounds. I doubt gravity reversal would be very lethal to a Celestial."

Conrad suddenly looked around as if he'd remembered something. "Before it occurred to me to do an explanation like this, it seems Researcher Nosapp—my assistant—ran off somewhere. I believe he was looking for a way outside, even though there's a way to get out without doing that..."

While Conrad muttered to himself, Orphen piped up, "That guy? We just saw him. I'm sure he's fine. More importantly, what is it you're trying to say, anyway?"

"Ah, come to think of it, we strayed pretty far from the heart of the matter, didn't we?" the researcher said, still rather carefree. He even gave his forehead a little slap as if to say, "shoot."

"I happened to come across a valuable historical document, you see. When I read it, I found myself wondering about a report I once read on this execution site. According to this historical document, one thousand years ago, the Celestials—"

"—were already facing extinction?"

For the first time, Conrad was struck dumb.

It wasn't like Orphen was satisfied by this or anything, but he crossed his

arms, giving the man a glare. “After their first fight with the Basilatrice, the Celestials had already lost their ability to leave descendants. Just because the whole race was fated to die out didn’t mean they would suddenly stop dispensing justice, but to a dying race, the death penalty was pretty much nonsense. I can’t imagine they had a reason to build such a huge execution site. So this place should have some other reason to exist...”

“Incredible!” Conrad’s voice cracked with his sheer excitement. “You make it sound as if you were already well aware of a fact that I only just learned by reading a historical document! Especially that bit about Celestials not being able to leave descendants; I thought there wasn’t anybody else who knew that! Where on earth did you acquire such knowledge?!”

“Mm...well, you know, some place or another.” He waved his hand to play off the question.

Dortin cocked his head. “Err, I’ve been wondering this since yesterday, but...this historical document...didn’t you say it was written in modern language? Can you really trust something like that?” he asked.

Orphen gave a start when he heard that. He started to ask a question to see if his suspicions were correct, but before he got very far, Conrad was sticking his hand into his pocket with a smile on his face like a boasting child.

“Oho...you’d like to know? About this famous banned book. I doubted my eyes when I saw this in a used bookstore. It’s said that no insignificant number of people have given their life to obtain this very volume. This appears to be a translation of the text...”

Orphen was sure of it when he heard the man’s explanation. He held his head in his hands.

“It’s right here!”

The book Conrad removed from his pocket with his shout was...a rather cheap-looking, flat volume. The paper looked to be of poor quality, so the book was likely very light. It was gaudily decorated, with a gold embossed border. All the embellishments just made the cover look even cheaper. The coloring was all over the place, too. It was a pink base with green stripes, and a large title proclaiming...

“...The World Book?” Dortin read it out loud.



“Well?! It’s amazing, isn’t it?! Do you want to come near me so you can see it up close? You can see as much as you like if you float up to the ceiling. I’m afraid you’ll have to forgive me for not handing it over to you. If I let go of it, it’ll fall, and I won’t be able to retrieve it—oh? What is the sorcerer doing curled up on the floor like you’re upset?”

“N...No, it’s nothing...”

I-It was supposed to be kind of an important historical document, but with all the stuff going on with us, my sister burned it, so since I felt kinda bad about it, I wrote a little summary myself... Orphen held his head, going over the circumstances of the book’s creation to himself. He’d thought he’d never see the thing again, but they’d been reunited all too quickly.

Conrad flipped through the “World Book,” making a pensive face all on his own. “There’s a passage that I don’t quite understand here, though... It reads, ‘So, I don’t really get it, but some goddess appeared from somewhere-or-another and I guess we’re in trouble because of that. Get outta here, goddess’... How would you interpret that?”

Getting over his initial shock, Orphen stood up and explained himself in a low voice. “Well...maybe they were planning to take it seriously at the start, but then it kinda started to feel ridiculous writing all that crap out after a while...”

“I see... A valid interpretation, I suppose!”

“Anyway!” Orphen shouted at the top of his lungs. The fact that he was mostly just trying to change the subject was something he decided to keep to himself. “I get that it’s not really an emergency or anything, but we should probably find this Nosapp guy and the stupid idiot raccoon I find my fate tied to, right? Before they do anything stupider than they’ve already done.”

“I suppose you’re right. Well, there’s a transference device through this corridor, so if I can master its usage, it shouldn’t be too hard to find them with it. I mentioned this before, but the brother of that not-a-killer-mushroom took the research notes of my predecessor that I discovered in these ruins.”

“Listen...” Dorton started to protest, exhausted, but unrelated to him...

Alarm bells were going off faintly in Orphen’s head. It wasn’t because of

anything specific, but...

...*What is it?* He felt like he was forgetting something important.

“...?” Something uncomfortable caught in his throat, Orphen watched Conrad leave the green room and Dortin cling to the wall to try to climb up to the hall on the ceiling.

He shook his head, ridding himself of that strange feeling.



I don't mind.

Really, I don't.

If all of this means nothing.

If it's all useless, for the rest of time.

But there's something I want to tell you. I want to tell you that it's enough.

It's enough...

Chapter XIV: A Me Who's Not Myself

It wasn't difficult to do it to that man.

She plunged the silver steel into his neck.

There was no scream.

She didn't have to worry about blood splashing onto her either.

There could barely be any bleeding—the man could not die, after all. Not until he could be used, that is.

The man's partner turned toward her. Had he not noticed her until now? Perhaps he was even more foolish than she'd thought. It mattered not to her either way.

She didn't mind. She plunged the steel into his chest as well.

The man took something out of his pocket and threw it.

There was a flash, and she felt some pain.

She felt pain, but...

She didn't mind. She told herself that as she looked down at the fallen men.

Ever since that day she'd learned to cry, she didn't mind anything. After all, whatever happened, she could just cry later.



"Isn't it kinda weird that there's only one bloodstain?" Those were Claiomh's thoughts on the matter.

"Who's to say it's blood?" That came from Fien Lotz, who was still calmly gazing at the notebook, just like before.

Majic didn't have any way to tell one way or the other. And to be perfectly honest, he wasn't really concerned with the answer himself. Whether it was a bloodstain or not, that didn't change the fact that they were in an extremely mysterious place. And mysterious meant dangerous. Eris was still unconscious

and couldn't tell them anything. Though she didn't seem to be hurt at all.

And...

"Heeey." Volkan's voice came from the high, high ceiling—about ten meters, it looked like—where he was standing upside down. "I feel like I'm really far away from you guys up here. I'm lonely."

"What do you want us to do about that?" Claiomh spat coldly.

Majic sighed, looking around. He found he was wrapping his arms around himself—he just couldn't shake his sense of unease. He didn't know exactly what sort of place they were in, but he'd felt a sensation like this many times in the past.

A building with large spaces inside it. Floors and walls with no scuffs. Lines of devices he couldn't guess the use of. Countless tanks containing green fluid, in rows and rows.

He was very familiar with this feeling. It linked together every Celestial ruin he'd ever been in.

He turned around and found a model of the area stuck onto the wall. It was the same as the one he'd seen in the Branch of the Forest—and the same thing existed in the president's office of the Lotz Hotel as well. Every detail of the town was represented on the model, down to the locations and appearances of each inn. Though if it was made by the Celestials, it had to be hundreds of years old.

"...They change," Fien said quietly, as if he'd read Majic's thoughts.

Majic looked over, but the old man hadn't even looked up from his book. He was squinting—maybe his age had affected his eyesight—and reciting, as if reading from the journal, "They're made up of sand that can change color infinitely, built to respond to changes in the terrain and reproduce those changes automatically. The transference power doesn't work unless you're on top of those models. They're limited in that way. You use them by placing your hand on the map and reciting a password. There are several such devices in the area, and you can only transport yourself to another location with a transference device."

Majic just watched him read. There wasn't any particular meaning in it; he'd just missed his chance to look away.

Maybe the boy's gaze bothered him, or he had some other reason. Fien Lotz looked up from the notebook. He narrowed his eyes in a different way than he'd been squinting at the book and said, "Junior took them out from here. The device in my office and...the other one."

Gang. The word surfaced in Majic's mind. "Err..." He decided to ask his question for now. "Alright, but...I still have no idea what's going on here..."

The old man turned to him and Majic stepped back timidly. But all the man said to him was, "You said you wished to find Sheena, did you not?"

The words were so sudden, all Majic could do was stand there blankly, unable to even repeat them back to him.

"If she disappeared, then she's here."

"Disappeared?" Claiomh turned around and pursed her lips. "That's not what happened. Your underlings abducted her—"

But the old man didn't acknowledge her words. He just waved his hand to cut her off and told her plainly, "I'm here to search for my son, the author of this research journal. It was a dull pastime of his, but he came to these ruins often...saying that these devices could overturn all tragedy, or something stupid to that effect."

Fien looked around the room thoughtfully. "That was 20 years ago now."

There was a pain in his voice like he was utterly exhausted from shouldering those long years all this time. "My son disappeared into these ruins and never came back. Along with the woman who sang in my bar at the time... Sheena Shosky."

At that moment, shrill laughter rang out through the quiet ruins.



Today again, I watch it drift.

I watch it float.

Searching aimlessly, soundlessly, through the smoothly flowing liquid, as if trying to gain back something.

The liquid fills the space completely, and it grows inside it, just as it's supposed to, waiting to be filled as well.

Or maybe it's waiting to be dissolved inside that liquid...

A laughing voice. A mocking, trembling laughter.

It's my own laughter. It's stupid, yet I can't stop it.

And even after I'd learned to cry, too... Why on earth am I laughing?



"...Hm?" Orphen looked up. He was fairly certain he'd heard something. Something that made his hair stand on end.

He couldn't quite place it, and it didn't seem to have been triggered by anything. There wasn't even an echo of it remaining in his ear, but...

...*A scream?* That's what he thought it was.

He turned around, feeling unsatisfied as usual.

He was right outside of the room, having just left it through its only exit. There were countless other doorways branching out from the long hallway. However, none of them were at floor level. They were all up near the ceiling, so that if you were walking up there, it would be easy to get to them, just like Orphen thought they would be.

Was this place a prison? He wondered, contemplating the place's origins. There were no bars over any of the doorways. But Celestials were all able to teleport with sorcery anyway, so there was no point in locking them up.

At the end of the hallway was a doorway that was different from the others. How was it different? Well, that was simple. This one had a door. It was just a thin, wooden door. And like everything else, it opened the opposite way, to the left. Likely for the same reason there were no bars on the cells, the door had no lock.

The room beyond it wasn't too spacious, and felt more oppressive due to

lacking the beds present in the other rooms. Deep inside lay a familiar three-dimensional map, which Conrad and Dortin were currently peering at. For some reason, unlike everything else, this map wasn't installed on the ceiling, but was sitting on the floor just like normal.

He didn't have to study it closely to recognize that it was the same as the model in the inn. Rather than an inn that was built like a private house, the object seemed more at home in this place that was devoid of reality.

"Right, this is the teleportation device," Conrad turned around and said that as if he'd only just remembered to. He looked rather pleased with himself.

"You said earlier," Orphen told him, raising an eyebrow in annoyance.

Conrad had actually tried to explain the device a dozen times since they'd arrived in this room, but no matter what he did, he couldn't actually get it to activate.

"Hmm." He looked down at it again, frowning—not that his face actually moved enough to really form a scowl. "It worked perfectly last time... Just point your finger toward where you want to go, and the password was..."

He was muttering, so Orphen couldn't hear him very well, but he got the gist of it. *So he only got it working through dumb luck...* he surmised with a sigh.

Still... Observation wouldn't get him very far, so Orphen let his thoughts wander for a moment. Like the rest of the walls, the green ceiling was letting off a faint light. He looked up at it and thought, *If this is a Celestial transference device, then...what's the same thing doing in a hot spring inn?*

It seemed there were many similar devices in the ruins nearby. There were probably also several things that had been taken out by investigators. Of course, the rights of ownership of such relics typically belonged to the Union of Lords. It wasn't as if there weren't people who "liberated" them from ruins despite the threat of being charged with treason, but if they were actually able to get them out into the market, they'd fetch prices higher than buying similar relics from the royal family. In other words, it was basically impossible for a regular citizen to get hold of one.

Though he supposed it might have been possible for them to end up on the

black market if people weren't aware that they were made by the Celestials. If you didn't investigate them closely, you might just think they were really well-made three-dimensional maps.

...Well, not every investigator is like this guy, probably. Orphen stared at Conrad with narrowed eyes.

Dortin was giving him a very similar look. As Conrad puzzled over the device, the dwarf asked him, "It's not just that you don't remember the password...right?"

"Of course it isn't. If it were, you two would be in trouble, not being able to respect me, wouldn't you?"

"Uh, I think we'd be in a lot more trouble for other reasons, actually..."

"The password is..." Conrad said, grinning up on the ceiling. He muttered some words in Ancient Kiesalhiman, and then continued, "It means, 'Our time cannot be allowed to end.'"

"So, why doesn't the device work?"

"That's the question." Conrad folded his arms and cocked his head.

Orphen watched them like he didn't have any reason to be concerned and repeated to himself, *Our time cannot be allowed to end*. But their time...the time they were able to be alive, had already been lost.

They were a thing of the past. And all of the places that had been private to them then were now ruins that people were free to explore.

Orphen closed his eyes.

This was what it meant to lose everything. They were not filled with grief, nor did they tremble with anger. They had nothing. No heaven, no hell. They had truly lost everything. And losing everything meant nothing could compare, nothing could substitute, nothing could make up for it...

Orphen dove deeper into his thoughts, and then...

"Hm?" He looked up. He thought he'd heard something again, but this time it didn't sound like a scream to him.

No... It's laughter.

“Wah!” Dortin shouted in surprise.

Orphen hurriedly glanced his way. He and Conrad were still staring at the transference device, but something about the device had changed. The fine sand that formed the model on the surface of the device had whirled up like a tornado.

The sand changed color in the blink of an eye and quickly began to form into an image with meaning. And when Orphen recognized that image, he went pale.

It was like static. Static given form. It seemed to change shape, uncertain about where to settle. Its shape was incomprehensible, indescribable. It fluctuated, becoming something completely without meaning. Not that it was easy to tell what an image made of sand was in the first place.

“...?!” While he was standing there in shocked silence, the sand image cut out with no warning. It lost whatever power had been causing it to float in the air and fell back to the device, reforming the earlier model.

“...Huh.” Conrad let out a surprised sound. “I see. My pronunciation must have been a bit off. Hmm... I know I could get it if I had a dictionary. Unfortunately, Researcher Nosapp was carrying all our luggage, so I’ve lost it... You know, if you link ‘carrying’ with ‘lost’ it seems like it would mean theft, but Researcher Nosapp isn’t that kind of terrible person, just so you know.”

“That’s not important right now!” Orphen drew closer to the other two for the first time. “Two areas connected just now, didn’t they? I think the device activated. How’d you do it? C’mon, remember!”

“Why are you so enthusiastic all of a sudden?” Dortin cut in when Orphen started to get emotional.

“Never mind that!” Orphen shouted, feeling a sense of urgency that even he didn’t understand. He elbowed the two of them aside to stand over the device.

What was that discomfort I just felt...?

Uncomprehending, Orphen glared at the device, which had gone still.



Flames. Myself.

I was the one who had set the inn on fire.

I laughed, remembering it like a nightmare.

Holding the flame up to the dripping oil.

The light bursting, expanding.

I'd done it for a reason.

But I couldn't remember what that reason was.

I feel like I'd done it because someone ordered me to, but also because I wanted more than anything to do it.

Flames. Myself. Maybe that broke everything off.

It's stupid.

How could I have wanted that? These feelings would never end. My feelings for him. A desire, stronger than anything. I live with that wish. To live in this paradise...



Clack.

...Footsteps? Claiomh turned around blithely, hands clasped behind her back. She felt Leki slipping from her head due to the sudden movement. He flailed around, clambering back up to his usual position.

Claiomh blinked, glancing around. This was an incredibly boring place, she thought as she sighed.

If asked what it reminded her of, she would probably say the storage space at her house. Not her father's vault, but the storehouse in the yard. All it had stuffed into it was things they didn't need, useless things. A meaningless space, meant to be locked and then forgotten about completely.

Wonder how my mom and sister are doing... she found herself thinking. She sighed again. *Hopefully they're not fighting or anything.*

There was something melancholic about the green tanks. No, it was the fluid inside them that was green, wasn't it? They extended endlessly, spaced out in an uneven way that looked even somehow. When two tanks overlapped, they produced a deeper green that gave the room a vague gradation.

One of those map models was sitting on a wall. Without this, she probably would have forgotten completely how they'd come here. That was how drab the scenery was in this place. It was so boring, it killed her motivation to even observe her surroundings.

Fien Lotz—that old man—stood near the model. He'd said some stuff that sounded important and taken them to this incomprehensible place, and now he had the nerve to stand there muttering to himself and looking at some notebook.

Eris lay asleep at his feet. She had no obvious wounds, but showed no signs of waking. If she would just wake up, they'd probably know a little more about what was going on.

Majic was wandering around nearby, like he had nothing to do, so he was bored. Volkan sat cross-legged just above him, looking equally unoccupied.

For now, Claiomh slowly drew her blade from its sheath with a quiet noise. The smooth steel blade moved through the air with a soft sound. It was the sword given to her by that really unlikable assassin in Kimluck, but it did seem like a nice blade. Of course, she didn't really know whether or not that was true herself, but she thought she could recall Orphen saying so, so she decided to believe it for now.

Maybe I could tell the difference if I actually cut someone with it, she found herself thinking. Of course, she also didn't know whether or not that was true.

"Claiomh?" Majic piped up, evidently surprised that Claiomh had suddenly drawn her blade. "What's up...?"

"Nothing's up," she said with some irritation. She pondered for a moment on what to do with the sheath before shoving it forcefully through her belt.

"We're never going to get anywhere doing this. I'm gonna go look for Sheena. I'm curious about that bloodstain, too," Claiomh said, pointing to the circle of

red on the floor.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a calm voice cautioned her. It was Fien. He’d closed the notebook at some point, holding it under his arm now. “It’s dangerous here.”

“That’s riiiiight!” another voice echoed from the ceiling with no sort of restraint. “It may be no business of mine if a girl like you gets in some girlish trouble for your girlish ideas, but in your case, the trouble will definitely extend to other people, so it’s a huge nuisance! So, it’s not as if the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan, says this because he’s absolutely sure he’s safe from your wimpy girl reach up on the ceiling, but if you don’t want to be bled out with dental floss, then awaaaah—?!”

The bit at the end was a scream when Volkan was almost impaled by the sword Claiomh threw up at the ceiling.

Picking up the sword that had clattered to the floor, Claiomh turned to Fien and told him, “Sure, it’s dangerous, but that’s at least better than incomprehensible! Sheena and those two guys from your place too, they’re nowhere around! That’s not gonna change unless we go look for them!”

“I’m sure they’ll come to us.”

“How can you know—” Claiomh started, but suddenly went quiet.

Her face was still frozen in anger, but she slowly relaxed her expression, finding it all too ridiculous.

A change had begun to occur on the model behind Fien. The sand forming the map crumbled, rose up, and began to form some sort of image. The image let off light, spun around, and spit something out—something shaped like a person.

Forced out from the image, it fell from above the map to the floor, but it didn’t make a single sound when it hit the stone floor.

It was shaped like a person, but...this was no human being. To be perfectly frank, it was a beast. The first thing that came to mind was its resemblance to a monkey. But it also was definitely not a monkey.

The beast had a tank jutting out of the back of its head, and in the liquid of the tank, they could see a lump of flesh that looked like a brain.

What is that...? Claiomh could feel herself stop thinking. And before she was able to start again, her body went ahead and bet on what was likely the best response to the situation.

“Leki!” she shouted. It hadn’t been a shout with meaning or purpose. She had just shouted. But the baby dragon on her head acted swiftly.

In the next instant, the monkey that had suddenly appeared in the room with them was engulfed in white flames.

The monkey fell to the floor, writhing in pain. It just barely missed colliding with Eris and continued to be burned by undying flames.

Fien was trying to pick Eris up. Majic was screaming about something or another. Volkan...she couldn’t really tell, but he appeared to be making noise as well.

She couldn’t make out what he was saying, but the despair he was feeling was obvious.

Out of the corner of her eye... Well, really it was the same no matter where she looked... Everywhere she could see, no matter which way she faced...the floor, the walls, the ceiling, everywhere...

From every which place, monkeys like the one currently engulfed in flames were beginning to emerge.

Not from the transference device, but directly out of the floor and walls. Endless monkeys were popping up as if surfacing from a body of water. And on all their hands, she could see letters shining with light...

“Leki—” she shouted again, mind still frozen.

A second later, the monkeys vanished from sight.

Her vision went completely white, a bright light washing over everything—and Claiomh lost consciousness.



What do you want me to do?

There's nothing I *can* do, is there?

It's the same as it always has been.

And I'm sure it will be the same from now on—this dream will never end.

Never, ever.

...It won't?

Ack...

She came to with a feeling like cold water was seeping through the stones of her consciousness.

She tried to open her eyes, then deeply regretted it—a dull but intense pain wracked her cranium. She felt like if there were actually a hole opened up in her head, the pain would probably be something like this.

She endured it in silence for a little while. It didn't go away, but she was at least able to get used to it.

Eventually, when she was able to focus her senses on something other than pain, she realized she was feeling something unpleasant as well. There was some kind of mucous-like substance covering her body. She hadn't opened her eyes yet, so she didn't know where she was, but she could tell it wasn't a clean bed, and she was seriously starting to think it might have been better not to wake up at all.

She recalled her own name. Shossky. Eris Shossky.

Eris steeled herself and opened her eyes.

"Honestly, why be so reckless...barging in on someone else's territory like that..."

She heard a voice. Eris froze reflexively. Emotions welled up in her and then disappeared like they were too good to be true. She felt like she couldn't move her limbs very well. She had feeling in them, but it was like her consciousness couldn't keep up with her.

The first thing she saw was the floor. A green floor. The unblemished floor had a green liquid spilled all over it that was warm and reminded her of amniotic fluid somehow. She was lying face-down in that liquid. There seemed to be shards of glass or something like that in the liquid. And some lumps of dark red flesh that didn't mesh with the green...

Eris screamed. She tried to rise, body still sluggish. What awaited her was a scene lacking any sort of realism.

Her hands slipped against the fluid as she tried to sit up. She ground her teeth, bearing the unpleasant sensation. Or maybe she just felt too choked to make a sound. She panted, trying to obtain whatever oxygen she could, and she felt an agony like all of her ribs were contracting and then expanding again.

She didn't understand it, but the green floor and ceiling of the room seemed to go on forever. There were no sorts of windows that she could see, but the walls and floor gave off light. There were a great number of huge tanks in the vast space, and she didn't know how it had happened, but some of them had been destroyed rather violently. The liquid on the floor appeared to have spilled from the broken tanks. And the pieces of flesh and blood mixed in with the liquid seemed to have come from the strange animal corpses littering the floor.

Some of the beasts weren't dead. In fact, most of them seemed to still be alive. They resembled monkeys, as long as you ignored the tanks jutting out from their heads. They weren't doing anything. They just stood there. Absentmindedly, in the shadows of the lined up tanks.

Just next to her, there were people collapsed on the floor, almost in a nice, organized line. They were all people she knew. The boy was...Majic, she thought, and next to him was Claiomh. And then...

There was an old man she was even more familiar with. Or rather, there was no one who lived in the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town who didn't know the man's name. The elder Fien Lotz. Eris reflexively recoiled with disgust when she saw him.

All three of them appeared to be unconscious. They didn't appear to be badly injured, but they looked singed in some places and dirty in others. From the destruction around them, there must have been an explosion or something.

There was a sword next to the fallen Claiomh. It was something she'd always had, Eris recalled, though she'd thought it was a fake.

Lastly, her mother was there.

She was staring at the tank in front of her, her back to Eris. And inside that tank was the most incomprehensible thing of all.

It was a lump of flesh. It looked like a giant piece of meat torn into strips. The strips waved about in the tank like a jellyfish. Its shape was completely without meaning, yet it caused an acute discomfort in her.

The size of it was some four or five times Eris's height. Its mass...ten times hers? More? She had no way to guess.

The hunk of flesh didn't seem to have a will of its own and merely floated there, but...she quickly realized that it wasn't just flesh.

There were legs sticking out of the mass. Clearly human legs.

...?! No...

The legs had pants on. Black pants. Part of a black suit. One she'd seen several times before.

The lump drifted through the tank, turning around. An arm stuck out from the back of it. A thick arm. She couldn't tell for sure, but it must have belonged to the large man.

It's those two... Lotz's goons, Eris realized, feeling a shock like someone had slugged her. There was no way the pair could be alive inside the tank.

The flesh continued to spin, showing her the first side of it she'd seen again. The legs were already gone by then. They must have been...drawn into the flesh.

"...?!" She didn't understand. She didn't understand, but...Eris suddenly discovered some part of her that was calm. She was shocked, but she also felt like there was some part of her that was calmly watching her shocked reaction...

"Mama...?" Eris whispered, coming up with no other course of action. She called out to her mother, who stood with her back facing her.

Sheena turned around slowly, nonchalantly, no differently than if someone had called out to her on the street. There wasn't any sort of expression on her face.

She shuddered as a thought flashed through her brain. She had no basis for thinking this, but...that "her who was calmly observing her" ...it probably had the same expression her mother did right now...

"Eris." That was all Sheena said.

Countless questions went through Eris's head as she looked up at her mother, but before she could ask any...Eris froze.

She realized her mother was holding a sword. It was the sword that man named Orphen had left with her. But had she been holding it when Lotz's lackey broke the window and entered their inn? Before she could say anything, Sheena began to speak indifferently, almost without blinking.

"I figured I'd have to tell you about this one day or another."

"What? What are you talking about?" Eris asked, shaking her head unsteadily. "Where are we...?"

"Ruins. I messed with the map in the inn a little bit to hide them...thanks to that, there's one more hill than there should be on it..."

"...?"

"How do I explain this... There's no brains in that head of yours, so I have to figure out how to explain so you'll get it," she muttered, turning to face the tank again.

Eris also looked back at the floating flesh. And...



“Aaaaaaaaah!” She screamed. The flesh was changing shape.

Into a person. No...into something close to a person.

If anything, it looked more like a doll made out of clay by a child. Still, the flesh swelled, spewing bubbles, like it was frantically trying to form itself into a human shape. It split, attempting to create an arm—unable to make the fingers, the flesh twisted and grew in strange directions. The grotesquely deformed head was slanted at an angle, showing two faces. It was confused. The lump, which wasn't the size of a person, was trying to squeeze itself into a shape it was too large for, so it was becoming nightmarishly warped. It was like a horrible combination of multiple people forced into a gigantic human shape.

“Shut up!” Sheena barked. There was rage on her face when she turned back around to her daughter. “You are such a little idiot! I can't believe you would scream...you would see this and scream!”

Her mouth was taut and trembling. This was the first time she'd ever seen her mother so angry. Her narrow shoulders were raised, her arms were tense, the silver blade in her hand swaying.

“You really are a hopeless idiot—”

“You're the idiot, Sheena.” That voice alone was calm in this unrealistic scene. And at the same time as the voice, there was a dull *shunk*.

A sword had stabbed into Sheena's gut.

Holding the sword was the old man. The elder Fien Lotz had grabbed Claiomh's sword and stabbed it into Sheena's side, reaching up from the floor.

Sheena just looked down at it coldly.

Eris watched wordlessly. She felt like she could hear a voice from somewhere far away. So far that it had nothing to do with the scene in front of her.

It said, *What are you doing? That's enough...*

Chapter XV: A Past That Never Ends

“So, you were keeping my son here like a little pet of yours.” There was steel in the elder Fien’s voice.

“You finally caught me.” Meanwhile, in Sheena’s, there was ice.

There was no pain or despair in her voice despite the tip of the blade buried in her side. Her voice was hollow, like she was exchanging a mere greeting.

Fien slowly sat up and then stood. Still gripping the sword, he told her, “I’m taking back what you stole from me...my son’s body.”

“That’s funny.” Sheena narrowed her eyes. “You were the one who betrayed him!” she shouted, leaping back.

The sword pulled out from her stomach. Eris flinched, anticipating the spray of blood that would follow.

But Sheena was completely unscathed after jumping back. There was no wound or anything, even though the blade should have sunk several centimeters into her body.

Fien yelped with surprise as some sort of glowing letters lit up on Sheena’s stomach—what happened next was completely out of the realm of things Eris could understand.

From Sheena’s stomach, one of those beasts—the monkeys with the glowing runes on their hands—leapt out. If she were to believe what she’d seen, it seemed like the monkey had been hiding inside her. The momentum of the monkey’s leap carried it right to Fien.

“Damn you!” With nimble movements that didn’t match his age, the old man swung the sword to the side, tearing through one of the monkey’s vital points—or at least, it looked like he’d done that. In reality, the blade passed right through the monkey like it was cutting through water.

Shrieking shrilly, the monkey grabbed hold of the old man’s neck. The letters

on its hands flashed with a bright light.

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

The sword dropped from the old man’s hand, the blade striking a metallic sound against the floor. Eris clearly saw the man’s form warp. The monkey leapt down to the floor for a moment, then jumped up on the man again. This time, it was like a tackle as the beast pushed him down. Fien stumbled when the monkey shoved him, hitting his back against a tank. And just like that, he slipped right through the thick glass and found himself inside it.

The old man was forced into the tank, mouth frozen in the shape of a scream. He floated into the green liquid, unable to even struggle...and gradually approached the mass of flesh that dominated the space inside the tank.

Eris could see despair clear on the elder Fien Lotz’s face as the back of his head made contact with the flesh. The meat swelled up and swallowed the old man’s body in an instant. Not too quickly, but not taking much time either, the flesh went through the same transformation as before. It distorted, approaching the shape of a person, then gave up on the transformation and returned to simple meat.

All this happened in only a few seconds.

The monkey who’d shoved the elder Fien into the tank then pattered over to its watching companions.

All Eris could do was watch the process in silence. All that remained on the floor was the fallen sword... And all she heard was...

“What a stupid man.” Sheena muttered that as she held the sword to her chest. “Should have just kept running that hot spring gang until he died.”

“...Mama...?” She’d wanted to just stay silent until it was all over. The temptation to keep her mouth closed was unbelievably strong. There would be nothing easier. But she couldn’t help going against all reason and opening her mouth. “What’s going on...? Explain it to me. I don’t understand any of this...”

Sheena didn’t answer right away. She walked over to Claiomh and Majic and observed them for a time—probably checking to see if they were only pretending to be asleep as well. The blade of the sword Sheena held swayed in

her hand as she looked down at the boy and girl.

Eris got goosebumps. “Mama?!” she shouted.

“I know. I’m just thinking about how to explain.”

No...! Eris shouted internally. She was trying to decide whether or not to kill them...those children! Children who have nothing to do with us or Lotz!

“Eris.” When Sheena turned toward her, there was no trace of such indiscriminate hostility in her face. But there also wasn’t anything that made her feel like what she’d sensed had been mistaken.

In any case, there was still that same ice in Sheena’s words.

“Eris. This...” she indicated the huge tank behind her, with the gigantic lumps of flesh floating in it. “...has the power to overturn all tragedy. It is a resuscitation device.”



Thud.

The transference device activated, and after the momentary lapse in his consciousness, that was the first thing Orphen heard.

He looked up to the tall ceiling and found that Conrad had landed oddly lightly, even striking a pose afterward.

“I see, I see.” The man’s terribly calm voice came from above them.

Dortin studiously replied to him. “What do you see?”

“My pronunciation was perfect, but in order to activate the device, you need to concentrate quite hard. You have to have a clear image in your mind of where you would like to transfer to. Unfortunately, a moment ago I happened to be thinking about the swindler attempting to pass himself off as my daughter’s fiancé.”

“I see...”

“*That’s* what was taking you so long?” Orphen muttered, looking around. “Which part of the ruins is this anyway?”

It was an enormous room full of large tanks. No, maybe it was more apt to call

it a facility rather than a room. But the whole area was destroyed like a large explosion had occurred. Several tanks had been smashed, their contents strewn about the floor. Most of it was a viscous liquid, but there were quite a few of those monkeys' corpses lying around as well.

"...This was a battle. Doesn't look like it could have been an accident," he muttered.

"Waaaaah!"

"Hm?!"

Suddenly two voices came from above, and in the next instant, two figures fell from the ceiling.

One smashed right into the floor head-first, and the other rolled so gracefully it was almost creepy, once again striking a pose on the landing.

The one who'd landed perfectly, almost without sound, was Conrad. And the other...

Orphen called out to the figure who was almost a splat on the ground, like a flattened frog, "What're you up to, you dirty little raccoon?"

"I am no raccoon! In fact, it is I, the ultimate hero, beloved by all!" He leapt up and drew his sword, posing as if to compete with Conrad next to him. "I'll have you know that to the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, I was falling so freely I felt like I had time to reminisce on past events, so it was, like, totally fine! And so, your luck's run out now that we've met here, since I decided the next time I saw your evil sorcerer butt that I'd give you divine punishment and defeat you and turn you in to the cops, so I hope you're prepared to die by accidentally folding down two pieces at once during a paper storytelling show!"

"...Well, seems like you're doing fine, in any case," Orphen replied with narrowed eyes.

Still posing, Conrad said in explanation, "It seems the glyphs' effect is up."

"Brother!" Dortin shouted. He ran over and told Volkan, "I'm so glad you're okay! I thought you were dead!"

“Hmm... Why’s everybody think I’m dead? Isn’t your brother always reminding you that he’s invincible?”

“...Really though, what are you doing here, Brother?”

“Mm!” Volkan nodded emphatically. “Well, I don’t really get it myself, but that girl with the hair curls brought me here against my will, and then all of a sudden, we were being attacked by these monkeys. Naturally, I, animal killer that I am, set about showing those monkeys what was what, but then all of a sudden *again*, the girl had to go and blow everything up. For the time being, I decided to hide until I could ascertain the state of the battle, but I guess the monkeys ended up carrying them all out of the room somewhere...”

“In other words, you ran away in the confusion of Claiomh’s explosion, and when you found that no one was following you, you came back, and that’s why you’re here all alone. Why is Claiomh here in the first place, though?”

“Well, there’s another transference device in the inn, you see,” Conrad cut in, walking over to them when he got tired of posing. “The method to activate the device was written in the notebook this not-killer-mushroom brother ran off with.”

“Hmm... As a name for me, ‘killer’ doesn’t have such a bad ring to it, but the ‘mushroom’ part just bothers me...”

“Is that really the problem?” Dortin murmured absentmindedly.

Orphen clucked his tongue. He put a hand to the back of his neck and griped, “Those two are always making things more complicated, aren’t they... The monkeys took them, you said? Which way’d they go?”

“If you want me to tell you, spin around sixty thousand times and bark like a —”

“If you don’t want my fist going into your head, you should probably just answer me.”

“That way.” Volkan pointed immediately to the center of the hall. A moment later...

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Eris’s scream came from that exact direction.



“This notebook...” Sheena withdrew an aged journal from her pocket. It looked well-used but not worn out. She stroked the cover almost lovingly and held it up. “...was written by a certain man twenty years ago. It’s a record of his exploration of these ruins...completely different from something written by those screw-up investigators. He was someone who shouldn’t have been limited to a half-assed education out here in the sticks.”

There was a far-away look in her eyes, like she was caught up in what she was saying. Sheena went on almost as if she was singing, notebook in one hand and sword in the other. “His research was flawless. He recorded every single one of this ruin’s functions in this notebook.”

She indicated the monkeys standing around them. “These monkeys act like my arms and legs. There’s something embedded in their brains that links them to my senses. They move at my command, aligned with me, to do what I desire... The method to make that happen is written in this book, too.”

Eris could only listen in silence. She didn’t have the confidence to proclaim she understood. In fact, she wasn’t even sure if she could really say she was truly listening. Her consciousness felt hazy. She was afraid without knowing why, like she was being told something she didn’t want to know.

Nevertheless, Sheena continued. “I came to this town twenty years ago.”

A tale of the past. It wasn’t as if she’d never heard this before, but something about it was different this time.

It was Sheena’s eyes. Eris wrapped her arms around her trembling body, staring back at her mother’s eyes as the woman looked down at her. Before, Sheena had never looked her in the eye when she’d spoken of the past. But now, she was looking right at her.

Why does she look so nostalgic, though...? There was no one who could answer her question.

Sheena’s quiet words merely spilled through the room.

“I found the biggest inn in town—Lotz’s, naturally—and got along well enough as a songstress. But Fien Lotz had a son. He was ten years younger than me,

but...that didn't matter to us." She shook her head as she spoke.

"...He was Fien Lotz Junior. We were married. Not with anyone's blessing—not even with anyone's acknowledgment, really. But we were married. Like I said before, he was a very intelligent young man. I wanted to bring him to the capital however I could. I wanted him to receive a real education. He wanted the same thing. But we didn't have the means to leave."

Sheena held up the notebook again. "He'd been coming to these ruins ever since he was a kid. He knew that they weren't really dangerous. And even if he couldn't decipher the glyphs, he knew more about the functions of these ruins than anyone else. I told him that we could sell his findings to a research team for a huge sum, and he agreed. So he consolidated everything he knew inside this notebook..."

Her voice gradually faded...she looked down and a small sound came from her. It sounded like she had spat.

"But he was betrayed. The elder Fien Lotz didn't want to lose his only son. He took the notebook and handed it over to a research team!"

Sheena raised her head again, her face tense, and turned around. The huge lump of flesh in the tank... Inside it... The elder Fien Lotz was inside of it too, Eris realized with a shudder.

Sheena kept going. "Of course, the notebook he handed over to the investigation team was incomplete. It was basically scribbled notes. I had the real research notes. I was also hiding a transference device we'd liberated from the ruins. But that scared him. He thought they would call his research incomplete. That was why he entered the deepest part of the ruins—here—where he'd never been before."

Her words were coming faster and faster. She panted as her lungs tried to keep up with her. "I waited three days. But he didn't come back. I used the transference device, based on his notes, and entered the ruins after him. But he..."

Suddenly her voice stopped, all her momentum gone.

Sheena turned around and looked sadly up at the meat floating in the tank.

“I don’t know exactly what happened. Probably something went wrong in his investigation. All I saw was him floating in this tank.”

Her eyes swam. She put a hand on the tank. “I dreamed about it so many times. I never actually saw him die, so I don’t know how it happened. But I cried for the first time in those dreams. I cried...”

After a while, she removed her hand from the tank. She gave a short sigh, and like she’d been able to let it all out in that sigh, any remaining emotion left her voice.

“I don’t know how it works, but as long as they’re in this solution, organisms don’t die. As he floated in this tank, he was alive that whole time! But—” She spread her arms. “As time went on, his body started to change. It broke apart. He wasn’t alive or dead...just somewhere in the middle. He wrote in his notebook that the resuscitation devices were incomplete...that they would gradually lose the elements required to maintain a human composition. I don’t know what those elements are...but unless I replenish those elements, he can’t...remain human.”

The folds of flesh seemed to sway in agreement...

“So I replenish them. Isn’t that obvious? And I’ll keep it up...until the day he’s fully resuscitated. Isn’t that obvious?!” Sheena repeated. Obvious.

She expelled a breath and laughed self-deprecatingly. “I sold the everyday stuff here, and turned it into capital to buy the inn. I ended up stuck here forever. So I could look after him...”

Her self-derision grew stronger. “It’s ironic. I used the funds I was originally planning on taking him to the capital with to keep him hidden here. But as long as I could revive him one day, I had no choice.”

Eris had just let her speak all this time, but she finally felt the need to say something. “That’s not possible...” Just as she’d been anticipating, the voice she squeezed out of her throat was somehow dry, almost like she was crying.

“There’s no way you could do something like that for twenty years without anyone noticing. It’s all just a joke...right?”

“There’s no end to your stupidity, is there?” Sheena said curtly. She shrugged

her shoulders with exasperation.

“Sure, it’d cause a commotion if people from the town went missing,” she said coldly. “But what about tourists...who just go missing on their way home? If it doesn’t happen too often, they’ll just go missing forever. It’s only one person every few years, after all. But I got three people today, so I probably won’t need another for ten years or so. In any case, there are never any bodies, so no one will ever find them.”

“But—” Eris couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Then, you’ve sacrificed people all this time to...to that thing?!” she shouted. “For years and years... If you didn’t have the men from Lotz, would you have done it to those kids?! No...even Lotz’s men didn’t deserve this...” Eris pointed at the boy and the girl on the floor, at the meat in the tank, and shouted...cried. She felt a hot tear stream down her cheek. “This...it’s so cruel...”

“Cruel?!” Apparently Sheena hadn’t been expecting the word. “Cruel... Cruel?!” she repeated it, enraged. “I told you, didn’t I?! I had no choice, and I won’t from now on, either! And aren’t you confused about something, Eris?!”

She turned the sword on Eris. The incredibly sharp tip of the blade— “You’re going to take over the task once I’m gone! You have no right to refuse, because you’re me!”

“Wha...” Uncomprehending, Eris could only let out a meaningless sound again.

Sheena raised her voice even further. “Who did you *think* you were? My daughter—as if! Do you know what this is, Eris?” She pulled her collar down, showing Eris her chest. There was a large, taut scar there.

“A burn...” Eris groaned. “You told me...it was a burn...”

“A burn, eh? Hmph! Well, you’re right about that. It’s a scar from burning my skin off. This device can create organisms from living flesh. *He* figured out how to do it.” She pointed once again—how many times had it been now?—at the lump of flesh. She was like a worshiper indicating her god.

“That’s how I made the brain sections needed to control the monkeys. But that was just a by-product. What I really needed was...”

Sheena's darkly glinting eyes didn't seem to be reflecting anything anymore. There was no shadow, no light. Her eyes were nothing but empty receptacles. They took in nothing and expressed nothing. Eris was terrified of them.

As terrified as she was of her words.

"What I needed was... When he returns to me, if I'm not here—there's no point, right? If there's no me who's a match for him. Eris. That's...what you are."

Creak. She heard a sound, like something grinding deep inside her ears.

"I cultivated you here several years ago, then made you my adopted daughter. I tried to have you inherit my memories as well, but it seems that didn't go very well. So you could be here to welcome him one day..."

That's what I am.

As the whole world seemed to pitch before her, she tried to scream. She tried to vomit something up.

But it was too big. It was stuck somewhere in her throat. So instead...

She tried to run. She lunged forward and tried to grab the sword lying on the ground. However...

All of a sudden, Sheena was right in front of her. She was no longer angry, just pointing emotionless eyes at her—along with the tip of the silver blade.

Eris's fingers were still several centimeters away from the sword on the floor.

She looked up silently.

"What are you trying to do? You...stupid girl."

She couldn't answer. Pinned down by the blade, all she could do was tremble. But just then...

She heard a voice.

It wasn't a particularly kind or pleasant voice, but it was striking, and fierce. A quick shout.

"I release thee—" There was power in the voice. Power Eris almost hungered for. "—Sword of Light!"

A white flash of light shot straight into the swarm of monkeys. Over ten of the monkeys who were just standing there were blown away by the bright light. Eris yelped from the vibrations of the explosion.

The light hadn't actually been aimed at the monkeys. What it had targeted was... *crack!* The light pierced the tank, where the huge lump of flesh floated ever so peacefully.

The glass of the tank didn't shatter—it must have been very sturdy—but there were several fissures on its surface. Cracks like a wild spider web.

Sheena screamed a wordless scream. Eris listened to it in the intense wave of heat that followed the light.

Tunk... There was a footstep, as if to punctuate the scene.

Out from behind the tank stepped a man in black. His usually sardonic gaze was sharpened now.

"I see how it is..." The man put his hands on his hips and shrugged his shoulders. "It's the perfect punchline for a fake hot spring town—a fake execution site and a fake resuscitation device."



"What's fake about it?!"

He'd been expecting her rage. Orphen kept calm and took a step forward. He watched as the blade Sheena held to Eris's neck glinted coldly.

Guess I can't get any closer than this... Orphen stopped when she took her hostage. Beyond the two of them, Claiomh and Majic lay on the floor, unmoving.

Eyeing the two women, Orphen laid it all out for them.

"An execution site? The Celestials couldn't even consider killing any of their own with their destruction right before their eyes. That's the reason for these big-ass resuscitation devices. They'd execute someone, then revive them some time later. It was probably like a prison term for them. This solves the problem of them not being able to punish anyone with stronger sorcery than them, too. I mean, if they knew they were being revived later, there was no reason for them

to put themselves in danger by resisting.” He smiled wryly in spite of himself.

“Thus, their crimes were absolved. This was the conclusion they came to in order to carry out justice for themselves. It’s pretty forgiving, fitting for an immortal race, I guess.”

“And that’s why I’ll be able to revive him!”

“No, you won’t!” Orphen raised his voice in response. He clenched his fists. “I can tell. These devices are incomplete. No, there’s no such thing as a complete resuscitation device anywhere on the continent. That’s why the Celestials didn’t tell humanity about these ruins—so we didn’t accidentally get our hands on them!”



Orphen glared at Sheena, narrowing his eyes and lowering his tone of voice. “The truth of the matter is that the Celestials disappeared from the world—not a single one of them was revived.”

Conrad ran in right then, feet stomping. He appeared, out of breath, like he wasn’t used to running, accompanied by Volkan and Dortin.

“Err...” Conrad started, massaging his chest like he was having trouble catching his breath. “I heard most of what you were saying...”

“Uh huh.”

“If you’ll permit me to make a rational observation as a researcher, if that man is alive, why not cultivate him the same way you cultivated yourself?”

“That’s rational...?”

“Call it fault-finding, then.”

“I don’t think that’s the issue,” Orphen grumbled before throwing Sheena a look. She seemed to be taking the question seriously at least.

“I tried a few times. Why do you think...he got so big?”

“But it doesn’t make sense. Why did it only work with the young woman there?”

“...Well, the guy’s unstable as an organism. Cultivate him in a messed-up machine like this and I wouldn’t be surprised if his whole body became just a mass of cancer cells.”

“Hmm. I came close to becoming part of that thing, so I wouldn’t want it to be cancer,” Conrad frowned like that was a serious concern of his right now, though Orphen really didn’t think the man was focusing on the right thing.

But Sheena told him coldly, “I’ve got no use for you.” She shot Conrad a scathing look. “I bet you smoke... He’s a delicate one.”

Conrad looked somewhat pathetic at that. “Even in a place like this, I have to take abuse from non-smokers...”

“Seriously, that’s not what’s important right now,” Orphen told Conrad, elbowing the man back a bit.

Conrad tripped and fell onto his bottom with an “oho.” Needless to say, what he’d stumbled on was Volkan and Dortin. They were flattened under him with strained squeaks.

“Hey, debt collector! You dare pin a great hero like me under some old dude —”

Shutting up the complaints from Volkan with a kick to his face, Orphen turned back to Sheena. “In any case...” He held up his right hand at her, eyeing the woman and the blade she had pressed to Eris’s neck.

Eris was frozen, unable to even speak, though Orphen didn’t know if that was because she was afraid of the blade or if it was for some other reason.

“In any case, I don’t think we’re going to reach a diplomatic resolution here. But don’t forget: you’re not the only one with a hostage. I try out another spell and I can destroy that cultivation tank.”

The monkeys, who had been steadily tightening their circle around him, stopped then. Orphen’s fingertips were pointed at the lump of flesh in the tank like a frame around it.

“Volkan, Dortin.” Orphen addressed the dwarves who had finally crawled their way out from underneath Conrad. “Go get Claiomh and Majic from over there.”

“Oh, okay.” Dortin nodded obediently, but Volkan grabbed his neck from behind.

“Hey, sorcerer, are you trying to shock everyone all around the globe?! You think you can order somebody around precisely thirty-eight seconds after kicking him in the most caved-in part of his face?! If you don’t cut it out, I’ll grab you by the face and kill you with wrist rotations—”

“I’ll forget about your debt.”

“...Huh?” Volkan looked up at him like he hadn’t comprehended the words Orphen had said to him.

Orphen repeated himself with a completely straight face. “If you do as I ask, I’ll forget every single cent you owe me.”

“...” It still seemed to take time for it to sink in. Volkan’s eyeballs rolled around in his head as he considered Orphen’s words carefully. After a moment, his eyes opened wide and his mouth began to form the word, “okay” before he stopped at the last second and asked, “Y...You really mean it...right?!”

“Yeah.”

“Since you really mean it, it’s not a lie, right?!”

“You think I’d lie about this?”

“Yessir, Mr. Black Sorcerer, sir!” Volkan struck a snappy salute before rattling off, “I, Vulcano Volkan, swear to retrieve the two brats with utmost haste! Look, my limbs are gaining speed even as we speak!”

He scurried over to Claiomh and Majic, muttering some strange incantation. As he did, he went past Sheena, but the woman didn’t move in response. She didn’t take her eyes off of Orphen—or his hand pointed at the tank, rather.

They made just as much noise on the return trip, but the two dwarves somehow managed to carry Claiomh and Majic over to Orphen. On his return, Volkan saluted Orphen once more, manly tears flowing from his eyes.

“We’re back, Mr. Black Sorcerer, sir!”

“Good.” Orphen didn’t change his expression one bit as he said to the dwarf, “Volkan.”

“Yes!”

“I was lying.”

“HEY!”

“I thought so...” Dortin muttered knowingly.

Ignoring Volkan, who was protesting with all his might, Orphen looked down at the still immobile Claiomh and Majic. They were sleeping blissfully, even at a time like this.

“Geez... And I’m stuck in a stalemate here, too...”

But suddenly... *Hm?* Orphen frowned, finding something strange. *Where’s Leki...?*

There was no sign of the baby dragon who was always hanging around Claiomh.

Volkan, who was still complaining, suddenly turned toward Claiomh then. “Ooh, you make me so mad! In fact, I would say ‘so mad’ perfectly describes my mood at this very moment! Finally spouting lies with a completely straight face, are you, debt collector? You’re right in the middle of your villainous season, I see! But if you’re gonna take that attitude, then I think you’ll find that I’ll do...this!”

He clenched his fist and swung with all his might into the sleeping Claiomh’s face—*squish*.

The girl’s face sunk in, and just like that...she turned into the same green fluid as the cultivation liquid dirtying the floor and dispersed out around them. At the same time, Majic next to her melted away into the same state.

“...?!” Volkan froze, eyes wide and hair standing on end.

Looking down at him, Orphen reflexively went into a defensive stance.

“Well! Since we’ve been found out, we’ll begin our surprise attack!”

A high-pitched voice that was very familiar to him rang out—and in the area in front of him, between him and Sheena, some kind of large rift in space formed.

A second later, Claiomh appeared, Leki on her head, grabbing Majic by the scruff of his neck.

Spacial transference?! Orphen gave a shout in his mind. He’d seen a deep dragon teleport before. They used a forceful composition to exert mental dominion over distance—space itself—nullifying the distance’s existence. Their dominion lasted only a moment, and as soon as the spell was over, the space naturally expanded instantaneously back to its normal distance.

As a result of this...

Orphen saw his life flash before his eyes as an explosion ripped through the room. His time as a boy being tormented by his older siblings, his time as a young man being tormented by society, and, well...more recent times where he

was basically tormented by all sorts of things.

And the present. Currently, he was being tormented by an explosion. Orphen sort of wanted to cry as he rolled along the floor.

The explosion ended, and Orphen came to a stop against the glass of one of the nearby tanks. Something heavy seemed to be crushing him. When he fully came to and opened his eyes, he found himself lying upside down with Claiomh sitting right on top of him. She must have been blown in the same direction as him.

Leki on her head, a slightly singed Claiomh gave a little cough to clear her throat and murmured, "That's weird... I was planning on showing up right behind Sheena and saving Eris, all cool. Why'd we get blown away after teleporting?"

Previous deep dragons he'd seen had formed another composition after transferring to protect themselves from the explosion. Obviously.

But Leki, who was only a baby, naturally couldn't perform such a maneuver. He went flying just like everyone else because of his incomplete defense. They should probably just consider it a success, since they were all still among the living...

Orphen decided not to explain all that as he groaned, "I see... So you had Leki cast his mental dominion on the cultivation fluid and made it into the shape of you and Majic. Then you two hid and waited for your chance to launch a surprise attack?"

"Good idea, right?" Claiomh asked, making no effort to remove herself from on top of Orphen.

Orphen glared up at her. "Don't ever do that again while I'm in a one-kilometer radius of you."

He pushed her off of him and stood up.

Everything around them was even worse off than him. There were more shattered tanks because of the explosion, and more cultivation fluid spilled on the floor, too.

“...How far’d we go flying?”

“Not that far,” Claiomh stated confidently, though she gave no evidence to back up her claim.

He quickly found the center of the blast—in other words, where they’d been a moment before. It really wasn’t that far away. They’d probably flown fifteen meters. Orphen looked around, giving thanks for his continued existence.

Everyone was lying on the floor in places, in various positions. Majic lay face down, eyes spinning, with the two dwarves collapsed on top of him, groaning, while Conrad looked like he hadn’t been in an explosion at all. He couldn’t quite tell whether the monkeys were fine or not, but at a glance, he’d guess there were still twenty or so of them around.

And...Sheena and Eris lay limp against the cracked tank, having been blown in the opposite direction as Orphen and Claiomh. There was blood coming from her forehead, and she didn’t seem fully conscious, but Sheena still had the sword pointed at Eris’s neck.

Their situation hadn’t changed for the better or for the worse. They were at the same stalemate, just with more distance between them now.

Orphen dragged his aching body forward.

In response, Sheena shuddered and re-gripped the sword. She pressed the blade even harder against Eris’s neck and shouted, “Don’t come any closer!” No matter how charitably you described them, her eyes were starting to lose the focus that came with rational thought.

“I’ll kill her! I don’t care about her... She doesn’t matter! I can just make a new one if I want to! If you come any closer—”

“Stop it!” The scream came from Eris. She shook her head, causing the blade against her neck to draw blood, and shouted, “Just stop it!”

“Shut up!” Sheena shouted back. She must have realized that the blade wasn’t enough of a deterrent, so she wrapped her arm around Eris’s neck to shut her up. “Be quiet! You shouldn’t even be able to say something like that anyway! You’re just the same as these monkeys!”

“...?!” Eris shuddered.

“You’re supposed to think like I do!” Sheena went on. “You’re supposed to think about what I want, and do as I desire. Yet, because you’re such an idiot...!”

“I’m...supposed to think like you?”

“That’s right. You’re supposed to do exactly what I want you to.”

“Just...like you?” Eris’s eyes looked at once unfocused and like they were finding something in the middle of the haze to focus in on. “What I think is...what you think...”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you! Shut up already!”

“The one who set fire to the inn...was me.”

“...?!” There was shock on Sheena’s face for the first time.

“I just remembered... The one who set the inn on fire was me. I did it... I did... But why...?”

Eris was asking the question, but Sheena was flinching like she knew the answer. She was so shaken that she dropped the sword from her hand. The silver blade fell to the floor and bounced against it.

Eris paid no mind to that and raised her voice. “I wanted...to leave.”

“Shut up— Shut up—” Like Eris was sapping the strength from her, Sheena’s voice was growing weaker and trembling.

Eris stiffened. She reached up and grasped Sheena’s arm around her neck, struggling against her. “I wanted to leave... I didn’t want to be stuck in that stupid inn...”

“What are you—”

“I brought that sorcerer back!” Eris was shouting now. “I brought someone who could stop you, Mama!”

“I told you to shut up!”

Just then, Orphen cursed.

Even he wasn't sure what he was cursing. Maybe it was himself. He had the feeling he'd done the same thing several times before in his life.

Something happened before his eyes.

He didn't know the reason why it happened either. Maybe it was because of Sheena and Eris's struggle. Or maybe it had just happened because enough time had passed. Maybe there was some other reason.

The tank they had their backs to—the glass tank, with all the fissures running through it—had suddenly split open. Green cultivation fluid flooded out over them—and from above them, a huge lump of flesh began to fall.

“Eris?!” Claiomh shouted. She plucked the baby dragon from her head and looked into its eyes. Her voice was practically a scream. “Leki, do something!” But the dragon just blinked its green eyes.

Orphen shook his head, lifting his right arm up. He watched as pieces of meat flew to the floor, and Conrad, Majic, Volkan, and Dortin scrambled over in his direction. “I release thee—”

“Wait!” The word came from Conrad, though it would have been a surprise to hear it from anyone, really. He was panting with the effort of running again. “You'll hit her, too!”

“I know!” Orphen spat at the middle-aged man running toward him. “I'll hold back...”

“It's not possible with your skill level,” Conrad judged swiftly. There was an inexplicable confidence in his plump face. It must have just been the confidence of experience that came with his age. However...

“Then who *can* do it?!”

“Just think. Watch closely, and think. You've studied such things as a sorcerer, have you not?”

“What is thinking supposed to accomplish here?!”

He knew what the man was saying was right, but Orphen was at his wits' end. Even as they spoke, pieces of meat were tumbling to the floor, exposed to the air, and wriggling around. The huge mass of flesh writhed, pushing over tanks,

absorbing the monkeys leaping at it, and growing even larger...

“It’s...destroying the devices...?” Orphen muttered without thinking.

“Master!”

“Hey, you scummy sorcerer!”

Majic, Volkan, and Dortin ran up to him.

“W-We need to get out of here!” Majic had gone white as a sheet. “Quick, back to where the transference device is!”

“...Wait!” Orphen cut him off.

It wasn’t because he was told to, but he watched closely. He observed the dance of the rampaging, tsunami-like mass of flesh. He didn’t come to any clear conclusions watching it, but he realized with some bitterness that he was getting a premonition. He was coming to understand something.

Part of the surface of the mass was bulging up strangely. That part alone wasn’t lunging up from the floor or wriggling. It was just bulging strangely.

Then the white surface of it suddenly burst apart. A silver blade tore through the flesh from inside it. Slender arms held the silver shortsword. And from inside the flesh emerged Eris, panting in want of oxygen.

“Eris!” Claiomh shouted with delight.

Eris fumbled her way out of the mass. Holding the sword to her, she stumbled over toward them.

“Eris!” Claiomh shouted again.

Conrad was nodding to himself, looking satisfied.

“Are you...alright?” Orphen asked, unbelieving.

Eris ran the rest of the way to them on surer legs. Arriving at their group, she wordlessly handed the silver sword to Orphen.

Orphen accepted it just as wordlessly.

He looked up. The mass was still writhing. It flailed, knocking down tanks and absorbing the monkeys still resisting it.

“...Let’s go. It’s not as if it’ll be able to survive for long outside of the cultivation tank.”

Orphen snapped back to attention at Conrad’s words. He nodded and looked everyone over. “C’mon—we’ll make a break for the transference device.”

“Let’s hurry. Look... Maybe it won’t make it for that long, but it seems like it’ll be headed our way soon.” Claiomh pointed at the mass.

If they ran, it wouldn’t take them long to reach the device. They all took off, listening to the sounds of destruction behind them. As they trod over broken tanks and the cultivation fluid flooding the floor, they eventually reached the map model on the wall.

“We made it!” Majic shouted.

The group all huddled around the device. Conrad placed his hands against it. He was panting again, and his face had turned a shade of purple because of the distance they’d run.

He caught his breath and closed his eyes, putting on the air of a researcher before chanting the password, *“Our time cannot be allowed to end.”*

...

Nothing happened.

Conrad put a hand to his brow and lamented, “I just can’t help thinking of that no-good swindler... I cannot believe the nerve of that man, asking me something like, ‘may I have your daughter’s hand’...”

“Oh, just get out of here!” Orphen pushed Conrad aside and put his own hands on the map.

He took a breath and shouted, *“Our time cannot be allowed to end!”*

“That’s not right...”

As his senses cut off, he could hear Eris muttering as if possessed.

“Time...ends. It always ends. It needs to end...so it can change!”

Everything vanished into a bright light, and the transference device activated.

Epilogue

“Aaah, what are you doing, Majic?! You can’t even crack an egg? What are you trying to do it with one hand for when you know you can’t? Look, there’s shell in it!”

“I-I can do it. You’re just distracting me...”

“Geez! Just leave this to me and check the seasoning on that... Hey, Majic, the lid’s not on this!”

“...Huh?”

Orphen raised his head, listening to the endless noise coming from the kitchen. He was seated in the dining hall of the Branch of the Forest Lodge. In the center of the room was a three-dimensional map of the area, reverted completely to its original state. The damage to the windows had been fixed with sorcery, so there wasn’t a crack left in them. Not having anything in particular to do, Orphen was just kind of spacing out in the hall.

The hot spring town was in no small amount of turmoil after the raid on the Lotz Hotel and the death of its owner, the elder Fien Lotz. He’d spent about a half a day fixing the Lotz Hotel with sorcery as well, of course, and thanks to Conrad’s testimony with regards to Fien Lotz’s death, they avoided being falsely accused of that particular crime.

He was having a quiet, laid-back soak in his exhaustion when the door to the kitchen opened. Claiomh popped her head out, looking rather upset by something or another.

“Orphen...” she called his name.

“What?” Orphen answered in a groan.

“Majic dumped a whole bottle of Tabasco into the pot...do you think we can still eat it?”

“Like hell!” he took the bait and retorted.

But Claiomh just clapped her hands together and said, “But what if it’s actually good?” as if she’d just thought of it.

“If you want to eat it, then go ahead.”

“Hmm. I do find it strangely hard to resist the temptation...” she muttered to herself as she disappeared into the kitchen again.

A short time later, a door opened once again. But this time it wasn’t the kitchen door, but the door on the other side of the hall.

Eris walked in, a slight smile on her face. She must have overheard their conversation. “I feel a little bad,” she told Orphen. “Making the guests cook the food.”

Orphen shrugged, listening to the chaos that had started up again in the kitchen. “Eh, they’re probably just trying to do something nice for you after hearing about your circumstances. Times like these, it’s easier to just let them be nice.”

“Yeah...you’re probably right.”

“Anyway, I should be apologizing to you. I mean, you even gave me traveling money.”

“Don’t worry about it. You never did find your bag, did you?”

“Nope. It’s fine, though. I got my sword back, and there wasn’t anything else that important in there.”

Orphen gazed at Eris’s face for a moment after saying that. He still couldn’t really get a read on her expression—it was like some key aspect was missing from her eyes, and her mouth provided just as little information.

They don’t actually look alike at all, do they? Her and Sheena... Orphen thought to himself. Maybe that was only natural, really.

While he was thinking, a shadow fell over Eris’s face. She hugged her shoulders and muttered to herself, “Why did I make it out...?”

Orphen knew the question wasn’t directed at him, but he cleared his throat nonetheless. “If you’d like a sorcerer’s opinion...this is just conjecture, of course...”

Eris raised her head and looked over at him when she heard his voice.

Orphen stood from his chair and turned his back to her, crossing the room to stand at the window. “You couldn’t call that thing a human being anymore...in fact, while it was being fed other people for twenty years and maintaining its original form, it basically became an object capable of only that process. Instead of taking in other people in order to return to human form, it merely gained the ability to incorporate other people into itself.”

He put his hands on the window frame and pushed it open. An autumn breeze blew into the dining hall.

“It merely unconditionally took any human being that touched it into itself. But once it had taken that person in, there was no need for it to take in the same person again. Well, normally there’s no such thing as a person who’s completely identical to another person anyway... When it fell, it touched Sheena first, so it didn’t absorb you.”

He turned around after he said that. Eris was giving him an uneasy look. He knew what she wanted to say to him, and understood that it was probably hard for her to do so too.

Instead, he took the initiative and said, “But...if you wanted to, I think you could interpret it like this as well: that man wanted Sheena Shossky, and you were spared because you’re not her.”

“I’m...not Sheena?”

“Well, you aren’t, right? Just like you can’t bring back the dead, it’s impossible to create an exact replica of a person, too.”

She looked up as if trying to organize something in her head. No, maybe it wasn’t anything so complicated.

After a few seconds, she returned from the depths of her thoughts. She giggled quietly and said, “thanks.” Orphen had to admit, the faint smile on her face...was rather attractive.

Clearing his throat rather loudly once more, Orphen turned away from the smiling girl. “Well, in any case, you probably shouldn’t stay here either. Conrad went down to Nashwater, and when his report about those ruins gets around,

the sorcerers' association will probably come to investigate, too. They'll want to take you in as a witness."

"...Where should I go?" There was anxiety in her voice again.

Orphen looked over at her and found her hanging her head, her fingers entwined, like a child who'd been turned down when she asked someone to play.

"How will I get by? I don't know any place but here."

Orphen sighed. He looked outside through the window and told her, "I dunno. But you said it yourself, didn't you?" He looked out at the quiet, unchanging hot spring town. "Time ends so it can change. I'll try not to forget that either," he added quietly.

He watched thin strings of clouds float across the sky. Leaning out of the window and looking up at the sky far above him, he muttered, "That's probably the only difference between us and the Celestials—those who can only live in the past."

"It's done!" Claiomh suddenly appeared from the kitchen, a pot with a flower pattern on it in her hands. The pot, held in tulip-shaped potholders (Eris liked flowers), was still bubbling noisily.

Orphen grimaced. "...Claiomh."

She trotted over to him, looking rather sunny. "Yeah?"

"That was rather fast."

"...What was?"

"Well, if you had to redo the whole thing, it didn't take very long, did it?"

"Redo it?"

"You know...because of the Tabasco."

"Ahh." Claiomh's eyes finally sparkled in understanding. She nodded a few times and said, "It was surprisingly good, actually."

"I told you I don't want it!" he shouted in as firm a denial as he could muster.

Well, in any case...



“Is it, like...it is, right? I’ve kinda been thinking so for a while now...” he grumbled to himself. You’ve got to grumble every once in a while if you’re alive.

“Right? Everybody just forgot about me at some point, right?”

Nosapp sat in a safe doorway in the ruins, muttering to himself.

He couldn’t see it beyond the mountains, but in the direction he was staring, far off in the distance, was the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town.

Afterword

“Uhh...”

“Well...”

“Hmm...”

“Listen...”

“Er...”

“...”

“No...”

“Yah.”

“Dwah?! Wh-Who’s there?! Who’s threatening the back of the author’s head with a metal bat?!”

“Me. Eris. C’mon, shape up, we’re in the afterword already.”

“Hrmm... True enough. Guess I will, then (Shape).”

“...Was that supposed to be a sound effect for shaping up or something?”

“Well then! It’s the long-awaited end of book 12! These are dangerous times we’re living in, with the author shamelessly appearing on the radio and a nasty rumor spreading that volume 12 would be on sale in December thanks to a conspiracy of the editorial department. It’s been an eventful six months! How have you all been?”

“Alright, well, no one cares about all that. Why’s there such a difference in page count between the first and the second half of the story?”

“Oh, no, this book may look thicker, but that’s just your imagination. You mustn’t pay it any mind. Plus, if you look at volume 10 and 12 together on a bookshelf, volume 11’s thinness really stands out between them, so to any bookstores, I’d recommend stacking the books face-up.”

“You would, eh?”

“Well, in all seriousness, I did make a bit of a mistake with the division. Or rather, this story wasn’t really the sort you should split into two parts in the first place. But thanks to the author doing every little thing he wanted to, the books became a little uneven.”

“So, you screwed up, basically?”

“Oh, shut it. I’ve tried consciously changing the way I write a little, but I’m gonna go back to the way I used to do things next time. Of course, the readers might not really care about all the little efforts I go to.”

“That’s awfully negative.”

“Nah, it’s realistic. Well, some effort is only worth putting in because other people don’t care about it.”

“This creature really lives his life entirely on logic that kind of makes sense and kind of doesn’t, doesn’t he?”

“‘Creature’...?”

“Oh, you don’t mind, do you? Anyway, what are you going to do next time, then?”

“What am I gonna do, eh...? What *am* I gonna do...”

“Is it that hard to decide?”

“Hmm... Well, I always had plans to do this to that, but maybe before doing this to that, I should prioritize...well, I dunno...”

“Uhh...”

“Of course, if that happens earlier, then...well, maybe not, actually. Yeah, I think that’s probably good. Mhm.”

“Excuse me.”

“Right, right. I’ll go with that, then. And as we go, I’ll put in little bits of the other...”

“...”

“So, what I’m trying to say is—”

“Yah.”

“Bwah?! Wh-Who’s there?! Whose metal bat is the back of the author’s head threatening?!”

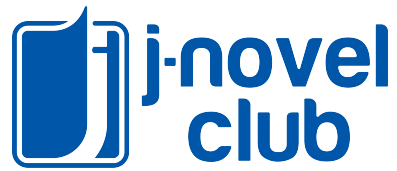
“Who knows? Well, let’s leave the creature alone and say goodbye for now.”

“Ah, she’s trying to wrap things up again like last time!”

“Well, just like last time, see you♪”

“Let’s meet again at the end of the next book!”

Yoshinobu Akita, September 1998



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 12

by Yoshinobu Akita

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